

Be My Voice

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Be My Voice

by [Kazhiru](#)

Summary

Severus Snape is left to rot in Azkaban, but that doesn't sit well with Harry at all. It begins with weekly visits, which evolve into tentative camaraderie. Harry may have taken on a task too big for him, but he will be damned if he doesn't see Severus back on his own two feet.

Notes

A slice of life fic, because I love my stories sweet and mundane. Just Harry trying to help Severus cope with his injuries, and Severus trying to learn that not everyone is out to get him. Edited by Halfbloodsev.

Prompt No. 9 from likelightinglass: A classic hurt/comfort with caretaker Harry. Either Snape surviving Nagini, Snape has a rough time in Azkaban and Harry nurses him back to health, or any other idea or AU you can think of. Just kind, caretaker Harry and physically or emotionally hurt Severus. Go wild with the details.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter One

The air was stuffy. It smelled of mold and mildew, and it was thick enough to cut with a knife. Harry shivered as he shuffled awkwardly on his spot.

"It shouldn't be much longer now," Harry said, sniffing. "The Ministry is still all over itself, and the trials are still in full swing. Everything's happening so slow. I can't imagine how they can still disagree whether or not Avery deserves lifetime in Azkaban. At least Kingsley's finally the new Minister for Magic, and he promised to speed things along." Harry was most definitely rambling, as was usual for him on these visits.

And, as was the norm, he got no answer. He braved on.

"I tried asking for a relocation — it's not like you're much of a threat in here — but they still insist on a trial. Kingsley said that he would talk some sense into them." Harry wrapped his cloak tighter around himself and tried leaning against the stone wall. It was a poor choice on his part, as the chill seeped through instantly, and now it was stained with damp.

"So, yeah. Not much of anything new on that front, but I'm still trying. I've got 20 more minutes." Harry glanced at the dark bundle on the other side of the bars. Not once during all his visits had he heard a coherent sentence from the other side. If it wasn't for the occasional shiver or grunt, he would assume them dead or sleeping. Hopefully the latter.

"Oh yeah, the Malfoy trial just concluded. Draco got pardoned with just a couple months of weekly Ministry checkups, but Narcissa got house arrest. Since there are no documented offenses on her side, she's only getting a metaphorical slap on the wrist for associating with known Death Eaters. I had to testify for those two. Lucius is getting Azkaban, but those idiots are considering shortening his sentence for good behavior." They were probably already coveting the rest of the galleons in the Malfoys' vault. The Ministry was so greedy, and the more Harry learned about it, the less he ever wanted to step a foot inside the place.

"Hermione is doing really well sorting through everything on your defense. She's hoping to get it so that we can just present it to the jury— with Kingsley's backup, of course — and get you out of here." Harry peered through the bars. He was able to see thick, cloying lumps of greasy black hair from within the tight bundle of sparse bedding. He shivered, mainly from sympathy rather than disgust, but he knew better than to state any of that aloud.

"Erm..." Harry stalled. He had rapidly run out of anything to say, but the guard wouldn't come back until the time was up. He glanced around for something to use as a conversation starter, and noticed a worn bowl of thick, graying oatmeal. "They say you haven't been eating much."

There was a slight shuffle of fabric, but no response.

"Have they been treating you properly? I mean, a health checkup, or something. Madam Pomfrey barely managed to get a look before they carted you off."

The bundle tightened, as if trying to curl around itself. Harry assumed the answer was either no, or fuck off. Probably the latter.

"I'll talk to them to at least try and get a better blanket. Or a shower." There were too many things lacking from the cell to list. Anything would be good by this point. "Snape, I'll get you out of here. I know I've been saying that for a while now, but I feel like we're getting close this time." He had

been saying that for months now. Those stupid trials were prioritizing the other Death Eaters, impatient to get them all locked up in Azkaban. Since Snape was already here, the Ministry was all too happy to forget about him.

"Ten more minutes." Harry bit his lip and glanced at the ceiling, begging time to go by a bit faster. "Hermione's still torn between getting into law or becoming a Healer. You know how it is with all that research into memory charms. Ron's still helping out George with the shop, he's now hoping he'll have enough saved to move out by the time Auror training rolls around. And as for Ginny, she's doing well, all things considered. She's starting her last year at Hogwarts in a couple of weeks." Harry felt like an idiot talking about his friends. He was absolutely certain Snape didn't care one whit about how they were doing, but Harry didn't have anything else to say. He wasn't even allowed to bring in the *Prophet*, as the inmates were supposed to be cut off from society.

It was all bullshit if you asked him.

"That's it, I guess. I have officially run out of things to say." Harry rarely talked about himself. He had come to learn that Snape's silence was both a blessing and a curse. Since there were no growls to stop Harry's yammering, he tended to overshare. That was why he tried to avoid opening any of his stock of canned worms.

It was astounding how much of a security blanket these visits were to Harry. It brought him out from his depressing house, and stopped him from ruminating about the war, or worrying over his broken relationship. Both Ginny and he had too much going on to juggle all of this right now. Having someone to listen without interruptions helped him to forget all about the Ministry madness: the numerous funerals, the countless trials, what seemed like infinite fundraisers, and the twice-damned press.

All of this had been pushed onto a man barely out of his childhood — but he alone couldn't pick up the slack.

The Ministry still asked him for Auror training, but Harry wasn't sure about that anymore. He knew exactly why the Ministry would want him: he was a publicity stunt. On top of that, he'd have to follow strict Auror protocol, which Harry had no idea how to do. All this time he had just been doing what was necessary to survive. He worked on instinct, and he knew it. If someone needed his help, all those guidelines would become just that: lines drawn upon sand, ready to be trampled on when he needed to rush head first into danger.

To be honest, Harry just wanted to be left alone. He had no idea what he wanted to do now. The Ministry granted him, as well as Ron and Hermione, their NEWTs as "proof of outstanding deeds done to wizarding kind". All he knew was that he didn't want a job where he had to deal with any sort of public interaction. Not for a while at least.

Harry felt as though he was the only one who hadn't already made plans for the future.

He had mentioned all these things to Snape, but only in passing and mostly hidden under another topic. He knew perfectly well how little Snape would appreciate any whining from him.

Harry realised their time was almost up. "I'll see you next week, I guess." He would. These scheduled once-a-week visits had been going on ever since Snape had been first brought in.

When Harry first heard that Snape had been carted off to Azkaban, he had felt obliged to rectify that mistake. He had seen Snape's memories. He knew how much Snape had sacrificed to make things right again. He didn't like the man but he knew Snape didn't deserve this.

He had started by talking to McGonagall and Kingsley. Once he had cleared up their assumptions about Snape, Harry was sure that with the two of them, they'd have enough solid ground to stand on. He hadn't revealed anything about Snape's past, but he had made it clear that he was working in their best interest.

Once he got Snape's release proceedings started he pulled some strings to get visiting rights. That was also one of the few things he had ever willingly used his fame for.

He wanted to see that Snape was holding up okay in Azkaban. The dementors had been removed, but it remained absolutely horrible without them. Sobs could always be heard echoing off the stones, the cold was biting, the air damp and stagnant. And the darkness... If you were lucky enough to get locked up deeper inside where it was marginally warmer and it stank slightly less of seawater, it was near constant darkness in exchange.

At first Harry had wanted to ask Snape for his account of things and how he wanted to proceed, but Snape ignored him. He had been worried if Snape was too injured to talk and so had talked to the guards and managed to secure healer visits. He received the report later. With Hermione's help they had gone through the extensive list of ailments Snape had collected during his stay.

It wasn't good.

Snape's throat was in horrible condition. It was probably the reason he wasn't eating properly. And that was the reason he'd lost weight, and started catching colds. The healers treated the wound Nagini left until it wasn't life threatening. Azkaban wasn't St. Mungo's, but they did their best.

Harry hadn't said anything more about it than the slight jabs about Snape's lack of appetite. He did worry. With every single visit he worried more. He hadn't even seen the wound, yet he was increasingly anxious about Snape's continued silence. Snape was a proud man. If Harry were to say anything about it, nothing would stop Snape flinging his uneaten oatmeal straight at Harry. The fact that Snape hadn't done so yet foreboded a bigger issue.

All feeble hopes Harry had of asking about Lily were completely forgotten for the time being; regular checkups on Snape were suddenly top priority.

He had justified it as being worried for the man's health. That was certainly true for how these visits started, but it wasn't what kept him coming back. That was a bit more selfish, in all truth. It started with him talking about the Ministry, and it snowballed from there. After all, it was hard to talk about the Ministry and the trials without mentioning his own involvement in them. And once he got started on that, he might as well mention the other Ministry grievances that kept impinging on his life. He might have mentioned the reporters, too. And his breakup. And he certainly kept Snape updated on Ron and Hermione's lives.

Snape was so easy to talk to when he didn't talk back.

Of course he had gone through this with Ron and Hermione, but he was glad to just vent without hearing the ever-present, "Oh, Harry," when Hermione tried to reason it with him, or the "Don't worry about it, mate" from Ron. Both of them had very good reasons, and Harry loved them, but sometimes he just wanted to get it all out. Not that Snape would appreciate any of his lamenting, which is why he cleverly disguised it as other topics and sass.

So no, the weekly visits were not necessary, but neither were the Ministry officials and reporters at Harry's door when the only thing he wanted to do was sleep forever. Naturally he would keep coming back here to "update Snape on the life beyond these walls," as well as bitch about the current state of things. Even if he had to take the boat across every week. Even if the air here was

stuffy and stagnant.

The plus side to this was that the guards were finally getting used to "The" Harry Potter walking into their fine establishment to grace them with his presence.

"Ready to leave?" rasped the guard on duty. Harry was already well familiar with this one. He was old, with messy gray hair. He kind of reminded Harry of Filch.

"Yep, I'm done." Harry paid a last glance at Snape, and predictably got no parting words from him. "Until next week, then."

"You come here like clockwork. You are the only visitor he ever gets, and not even the other inmates' wives keep coming here as often as you do," the guard grouched as he turned, leading the way, the charmed lantern following after him, and almost striking Harry in the temple.

"Well, it's not that he can visit me." Harry was pretty sure Snape wouldn't visit him even if Harry had rare potion ingredients on a bowl next to his door with a "please take what you need" sign.

"That he won't." The guard's laugh was scratchy, which wasn't a wonder given he was stuck in here. Harry couldn't wait to be out of here to get a lungful of fresh air. Not that the air in London was particularly fresh either.

"He hasn't been eating much. Could you get him some soup, maybe. His throat isn't well."

"He gets the same grub as the rest of them. We have an alternating menu with dietary options for some of them. We are not a restaurant," came the harsh reply. Harry had seen the menu and, while it wasn't the worst, it wasn't grand either. The meal was usually either potatoes or rice with a sauce of some kind. There were no vegetarian options, so no hope of easy-to-swallow soups. It was either asparagus and peas, or you starve.

"Pea soup then? I can bring him a smoothie." It was a joke, but it wasn't received as one.

"Can't have that. Security risk."

"How hard can it be to screen a smoothie?" They could just run it through a sieve. Oh yeah, Potions Master. Can't have him poisoning anyone. Not that Harry would gain an inch no matter how he argued. This wasn't their first rodeo. "A thicker blanket at least. It's freezing in here."

"Still within regulations. We checked. It doesn't go below 16 degrees."

Harry grimaced. Being constantly surrounded by this cold wasn't good on anyone. "Get him the blanket or I'll give him my clothes right now."

"Keep your blasted clothes on." The guard grimaced, but Harry was feeling victorious. He was finally learning how to deal with this man. He wouldn't budge an inch unless it saved him some trouble.

"Glad we agree on something."

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"So, how is Snape?" Hermione asked, if only to stop Harry from pushing his vegetables around the plate.

"The usual. He still doesn't talk at all." Harry felt slightly bad, eating at a restaurant with his friends

while Snape was locked up in Azkaban with his stiff oatmeal. "I think I convinced the guards to give him another blanket."

"That's good. And how are you holding up?" Hermione blew on her soup. It was thick and creamy. Snape might be able to eat it.

"I'm fine. Why are you asking?"

"You do realize you do nothing except visit us, visit Snape, and hound around the Ministry regarding Snape," Ron spluttered through a mouthful of steak and chips.

"I just haven't really been feeling like anything. Going out just by myself isn't really relaxing with all the stares and whatnot. Grimmauld Place is still so gloomy, but I don't even know where to start renovating. The little time I spend at Ministry just saps it all out of me, you know?" Harry speared some tomatoes with his fork and chewed firmly. If Hermione started to doubt that he was having trouble taking care of himself, he would never hear the end of it.

"Maybe you just need a hobby. You have been a bit listless lately." She emphasized with her spoon. "Maybe you need a plant. Sometimes taking care of something else can really cheer one up."

"Wow, and that had nothing to do with books." Ron said.

Hermione spoke over Ron. "Or you could borrow some 'Do It Yourself' books from the library to help with renovations."

"Books, a plant. Got it." A plant wasn't a bad idea — Grimmauld needed all the life it can get. Anything to make it less like Azkaban. Harry had spent enough time in cold, desolate places.

"What are you going to do after Snape?" Ron asked, eating five chips at once.

"What?" After Snape. As in: after the trials and once Snape was out of Azkaban. Harry's shoulders drooped. He hadn't really thought of it; he hadn't thought about the future at all. He didn't know what he wanted to do for work, nor did he know where he would take his grievances once Snape wasn't there to listen. "Erm... I don't know."

"Well, what do you want to do?" Hermione asked. Harry was quite certain she would compile a list of all possible jobs he could take on.

"I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. All I know is that I don't want to work for the Ministry and I don't want to be in public for a while. The whole world is crazy after the war and I just want all that to settle down. After these trials are over, I feel like I could crawl under a rock." Harry groaned. He'd come around full circle and was poking at his vegetables.

Hermione laid her spoon in her bowl, tapping it lightly against the porcelain. "Do you want my honest opinion?" she asked, looking a bit sheepish.

Here we go. "Please."

"You are good wizard. You got E's in several subjects, including Charms and Transfiguration. While you might be natural at Defense Against the Dark Arts, you aren't bad at the other subjects either. I know you can be a bit lazy" — she ignored Harry's stink eye — "but I also know that you invest a lot into the things you care about. So, maybe you should think about a craft. I don't know what, but maybe something you're interested in, like Quidditch. Not as in flying, but maybe crafting the equipment? That's a charms field. Or maybe Wandlore — you know a bit about that

already — but it's quite a hands-on profession. You could be a DADA professor, but that would need a lot of studying and also public speaking. You did well in DA, though." Hermione paused. "Ooh, you could be a metal charmer, that might be fun. Really, just pick something you like and make a job of it. Invent new spells if you have to. Become a warding specialist!" Hermione finished; she'd got more and more excited as she went on.

Harry was astounded.

"What does a metal charmer do?" Ron asked.

"They charm metal. Like the Snitch, for example."

"Charms doesn't sound too bad," Harry considered. He liked working hands-on with things. And if he got someone else to sell whatever it was he made, then maybe it wasn't that bad an idea. He didn't consider himself an artist though, so maybe something simple.

"I always wanted to have charmed toys when I was a kid. Sometimes I got my brothers' old toys, but by then the charms had pretty much worn off already." Ron shrugged it off. "You could also be an owl breeder. I could actually see you living with and training a hundred owls."

Harry grinned but shook his head slightly. "Maybe, but I'm afraid of growing too attached."

"There's literally hundreds of them; it's not like you'll ever be truly alone,"

"I'll think about it. Promise," Harry assured them both, as he went back to his meal. At some point during that conversation, his appetite started to reappear.

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Harry returned home later that evening. Grimmauld place was dark, as was usual, but Kreacher had lit candles for him. Harry had gone up to pick up a book about wizarding professions as well as a 'Do It Yourself' guide with Hermione before she had to dash to the Ministry.

Afterwards Neville set him up with a prayer plant, because Neville still thought him insane for visiting Snape every single week, and he would need all the blessings out there. But jokes aside, Neville assured him it was relatively easy to take care of, and the moving leaves might keep him more invested.

Harry spent half an hour walking around the house with his plant, trying to figure out where he would want it. Neville said it needed humidity and Harry almost considered Grimmauld humid enough on its own. The kitchen and living room were solid competitors, but Harry ended up placing it on his bedside table. After all, he spent most of his time in his bedroom, and maybe seeing it every day would remind him to water it regularly. He was also interested in seeing the plant actually move. One would think years of Herbology would desensitize you to moving plants, but such was not the case. Harry would forever have that kid within him who kept being amazed by magic.

"Kreacher!" Harry called as he ran back down the stairs to the kitchen.

"What does Master Harry need?" Kreacher asked as he set tea on the kitchen table. Harry decided to take a seat.

"I'm going to start renovating the house. I haven't had much time to get started on it yet, but I think it's time I actually made his place a home, instead of just a house I sleep in." Harry poured his tea and took a sip. Kreacher actually knew how to make great tea.

"But this belongs to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black! It has been like this for centuries!" Kreacher protested.

"And it will be, but I'm going to update the interior and fix up the foundation a bit. And maybe buy new furniture. It's going to happen," Harry pointed out, making Kreacher shuffle impatiently while wringing his hands. "Tell you what. I'll give you one week to move everything you want to keep up in the attic. You can also have Regulus's old room. I don't have much use for it, so make of it what you want. But this time next week, I will start banishing furniture to the street, and have the bin lorry take them." Maybe not the bin lorry. Knowing Grimmauld Place, he would need a curse breaker, but Kreacher didn't need to know that. Knowing him this would be good enough of a threat to make sure the house was empty by the end of the week.

"Master Harry shouldn't do that!" Kreacher instantly yelled, taking steps back and forth, not sure if to start moving things immediately, or wait in case Harry had anything else to add.

"Watch me. This house is falling into disrepair, and I won't have it. It belongs to the Most Noble and Ancient House of Black, so it shouldn't be a hovel!" Harry intoned, trying to butter Kreacher up covertly. He knew how much the house mattered to Kreacher, and he felt bad for tricking him into cleaning the place for him. Harry knew for certain that there would be a lot of changes, and he didn't want to completely change everything about the place Kreacher had lived in for decades.

"Kreacher, listen. This place is old. It's falling apart in places, and it isn't in the best of shape. I mean—" Harry took a moment to think. He looked at the peeling tapestries, the moth-eaten curtains and stained — well — everything. "Do you remember what this place used to look like when Walburga was alive? It must have looked better back then. Even if we keep the same furniture and the same tapestries, it will never be the same. If she stepped in here right now, do you think she would honestly feel right at home as it is? We really do need to renovate. And as we are at it, update it to the current century," Harry explained patiently, while gesturing around. "Do you agree with that?"

Kreacher looked around, with his lip wobbling the more he took in. "Kreacher is not liking this." Kreacher did not seem as distraught as before, just that he did not want any changes, but he could see they were necessary.

"You can help me pick up wallpapers and furniture," Harry consoled him. He knew it created a chance of Kreacher furnishing the place just as depressingly as it had been, but at least it would be with more recent furniture.

"Master is not removing house elf heads. Kreacher will be a part of that wall. Wall better still be there for Kreacher."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut, counting backwards from ten. All the prayers indeed. "Fine. I promise. But I might relocate them to another wall. And I promise you will be mounted with the others."

"The main colors will not be changed. Walburga would not have it." It almost sounded like Kreacher was starting to get into it. He probably had some ideas on how to go about this. Harry let him at it; it wasn't as though this house could get any worse.

"Fine. Dark wood paneling isn't that bad, I guess. The tapestry colors aren't that bad either, but I

want this place airier. The thick curtains are too heavy. This place needs some light," Harry mumbled as he actually looked at the walls. Sure, currently this house was a wreck, but he could tell it used to be a beautiful house in its better days. Maybe he could salvage it. It didn't particularly look like a house he would live in, but he could make do. It wasn't like he had any talent in interior decorating.

"Kreacher will help master Harry update house," Kreacher agreed begrudgingly. He better. He had practically managed to convince Harry to keep the house nearly the same, except with a lot less creepy junk and slightly more modern look.

"Thank you, Kreacher."

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"Kreacher is helping me fix Grimmauld place. He already managed to move all the furniture in the attic. Oh, and I got myself a plant. It's a prayer plant," Harry explained. He wished he had a chair but had to make do by leaning on the wall. Harry had already dedicated this coat for his Azkaban visits, so once Snape was finally pardoned he would Incendio it on the spot.

There was a bit of shuffling from under the two blankets Snape had bundled himself within. Harry was glad to note the guard had finally given in to one of his many demands.

"Yeah. I know you don't much care about that." Harry smiled unapologetically. "This week in the Ministry was busy; Kingsley said he managed to secure a date for your trial. You won't need to be present. Hermione and I will represent you, and the judge will then see about relieving your sentence. Apparently he thinks it's better like this, so that you can't defend yourself. The little they know," Harry scoffed, and watched entranced as finally, finally there was proper movement under the blankets.

He could see a bit of clammy forehead; the tops of grimy cheeks; messy hair stiff with grease; skin so pale it looked sickly — and eyes, tired and dark.

Harry swallowed, suddenly nervous. Snape had never before acknowledged his presence, and suddenly Harry felt as though he should greet him or something. He didn't know how to go about that, since this was Snape, his nasty ex-professor, a Potions Master who had helped him many times over, yet still calling him "Sir" felt like pulling teeth. He had got so familiar talking to him, yet he had never actually addressed him during these visits.

They both waited with bated breath. Harry refused to say anything unless Snape spoke first. But Snape just stared at him. Harry couldn't even tell if it was a glare, or confusion in the other's eyes.

For a moment Harry was certain Snape would say something, since he moved the blanket just enough to expose his massive beak, but he burrowed back under the blankets, turning his back to Harry.

Harry felt something inside him deflate like a popped balloon. He exhaled, releasing the tension he didn't even know he had gathered.

"The trial is still two — almost three — weeks away. I'll keep visiting as usual." It felt as if nothing had happened at all. Harry was back to his rambling, and Snape was back to ignoring him. It was weird to feel disappointed because of it. After all, Harry was quite certain there would be nothing positive coming from Snape's mouth had he the option to speak his mind.

So back to usual it was. Harry felt frustrated, and cheated somehow, but refused to make a scene

about it.

"Neville is going to start apprenticing with Sprout soon. He's going to be a Herbology professor, you know. If you decide to return to teaching, you'll be colleagues," Harry pointed out, feeling exceptionally petty. By this point he would take one of Snape's mean comments just to know he hadn't turned mute.

Which he might as well, since Harry felt that the stone walls would sooner echo his words right back at him than he would hear Snape's drawl ever again.

Harry sighed. Giving up. Snape would talk once he felt like it.

"Twenty more minutes. Erm... I've been looking into jobs lately. I don't really know what exactly, but Charms sounds fun. Yeah, I get it's a leap from the usual DADA, but I kind of want to do something easy for once. Not that Charms is easy, I meant more in the sense of 'Nothing trying to kill me, maul me, harm me, or talk my year off' kind of easy. The kind I could do from home. A craft maybe." Harry shrugged, seeking Snape's bundle for any guidance. He found none. "Do you think I could make Quidditch brooms? I never considered myself the steadiest hand out there, but the woodwork sounds nice and hands on. The charms balance it out, so it has a bit of variation." Harry glanced around the room, trying to build a nonchalant air about himself.

"I considered wand making, but all the books said it was really high concentration job. A critical stage could take hours to get just right, and you can't have any interruptions. I wonder how Ollivander does that." Harry's legs were falling asleep standing still for so long, so he stretched a bit, before leaning his back against the wall.

"If all else fails I can start breeding snakes." Harry wasn't serious. There was no way he would raise multiple snakes. Having one for conversation was fine, but most of his friends were traumatized forever, and he preferred having his friends visit every once in a while.

Harry glanced tiredly at Snape. He couldn't even muster the will to get properly exasperated. He had been spewing nonsense for the past ten minutes, and still got no response.

"What do you think you are going to do once you get out of here?" Harry wondered, kicking his leg. "You can do anything you want, you know. Once your name is cleared, you can go back to being a headmaster, even. Minerva would step down if need be. Although I don't think you enjoyed teaching all that much." Well that was an understatement of the century. "You were great at making potions though, so maybe you can open your own apothecary. Or maybe go into a DADA field; you always wanted to teach it, and you were a really great duelist." Complimenting Snape felt both casual, and extremely uncomfortable both at the same time. It was so easy every time he forgot it was Snape he was talking to in the first place, which wasn't hard when Snape never talked to ruin the immersion. But the moment he became aware of himself, he felt like he had just committed a cardinal sin.

"Wait, no. I had your Potions book in sixth year; those spells you invented were the best — Muffliato was so useful! [And all the edits you put in the margins improving the potion recipes were brilliant.] You should do that. Either start experimenting again or write a book so that others can use them too!" Harry glanced excitedly at Snape, only to see the man curl up tight. He seemed to be shivering, and Harry strained his hearing to make out the strained breathing, and a faint, muffled sob.

It suddenly felt below freezing in here. It was almost as though the blood in his veins had iced over. He couldn't have heard right. Maybe it was just a hitched breath? Shiver induced sniffing? Hearing any sound like that from Snape was just plain wrong. It didn't fit the picture. Harry didn't

know what to do.

The sudden creak and clang of a rusty door startled him.

"Time's up, Potter. Say your goodbyes." It was the same guard as last time, and Harry wanted to strangle him.

"One more minute." Harry faced the bars again, holding onto them uncertainly. He needed to say something.

"I'll get you out of here, okay. I hope I'll have some better conversation for next time. See you in a week." It felt weak, but he didn't know anything else to say. Only empty promises and hollow assurances.

The least he could do was getting Snape out. Harry just hoped Snape could hang in there for a little longer.

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The remodeling of the house was actually proceeding quite well. The previous visit in Azkaban had left Harry ill at ease, so he had channeled all of that into hard manual labor.

He started with the bedrooms. Sirius' bedroom didn't need much work, since Harry wanted to preserve it as close to original as possible. He didn't even touch the posters Sirius had hung on the walls. He was doing the exact same thing Kreacher had been doing ever since the late mistress' death, but Harry justified it with both himself and Kreacher having their own sanctuary. Namely, Regulus and Sirius's old rooms.

The master bedroom, on the other hand, had to be completely overhauled. Harry planned to turn it into a guest bedroom for when Ron and Hermione stayed over, and so he wanted none of Walburga's presence left in that room.

While he was remodeling, he also had to wade through the endless amount of junk Kreacher had not bothered to salvage. While banishing junk to the back garden to be Incendioed later, he actually managed to find something he had completely forgotten all about.

Draco's wand was still stashed in the chest of drawers Harry had tossed it into when he first got home after the war. Why he hadn't returned it during the trials, he didn't know, but he felt obliged to do so now.

That was the reason Harry found himself standing at the huge front gates of Malfoy manor. He felt incredibly underdressed and he wasn't even on their property yet.

"This thing has probably more wards than Hogwarts," Harry mumbled as he wondered how one was supposed to call for the people within. Send a Patronus?

"State your business." It would be a lie to say Harry didn't startle in his boots. There was a small, angry-looking house-elf at the gate. Younger than Kreacher, but still old. The pillowcase had an embroidered letter M on it.

"I'm here to see Malfoy — erm — Draco." Nice going. Already making a fool of himself. The house-elf did not look impressed.

"For?"

"Do I need an appointment? Just get him here, it's important. Please." The please was added as an afterthought. The elf probably did not deserve his temper, but the thought of dealing with Malfoy, willingly at that, had him on edge.

"Name?" Harry stared incredulously at the elf. For some reason it was relieving to hear that he meant nothing to this creature.

"Potter." Harry let himself relax. "Harry."

"You is to be waiting here. I will be back," the elf announced, and Harry let out a relieved sigh.

The wait outside felt like forever, until he heard a crack of Apparition and swift footsteps heading his way.

"What in the blazes is Harry Potter doing in my garden?" came Malfoy's incredulous crawl. "Was the testimony at my trial conditional after all?"

"I came to return your wand." Harry waved the aforementioned stick as proof. "But now that you mention it, I could use a favor." It was a sudden decision, but Malfoy's indignation never failed to raise his hackles.

Malfoy's eyes widened at the sight of his wand, and he immediately made a reach for it. "Give it here."

"I will." But Harry didn't. "One thing first: You know Snape, right? I mean, more than as just a professor. Your family knew him, right?" At least he assumed so, since Snape had literally killed a man for him.

"He was a family acquaintance, I wouldn't call us close though. Now give me my wand," Malfoy ground out through his teeth.

"I'm working on getting him pardoned. He's in Azkaban right now. He's not doing too good, and he refuses to speak to me." Harry moved the wand further behind his back to keep Malfoy's attention.

"What, you need him to speak to you? Reveal some made up scheme, rat up the rest of the Death Eaters? No deal." Malfoy was close enough to the gate to almost touch the metal with his forehead.

"No. I don't need anything. I got the trial date set in two weeks. He just seems really listless, and I thought you could visit him with me next Friday. Just to talk to him." Harry raised his hands in a gesture of good will.

"Do I get my wand back if I do?" Malfoy looked doubtful.

"Yeah, of course. You would get it back even if you refuse, I just needed you to listen." Harry handed the wand over. Malfoy immediately tucked it away.

Malfoy looked at him for longer than usual, considering what he'd said. "So, he's in Azkaban. My mother and I haven't heard anything more than what the rumor mill has dredged up."

"Yeah. They picked him up pretty much right after the battle. They did some minor healing spells and carted him in right after. He hasn't talked to me at all. Most of the time he just lays there all wrapped up in his blankets. I haven't been able to see how bad he is, or if he's handling Azkaban properly. All I have been able to do is get him another blanket, and the latest rumors, so not much at all." Harry admits. "But I'm feeling positive I can get him out of there soon. He just has to hang on a bit longer."

"Savior Potter and his misguided Death Eaters." Malfoy sneered, preparing to do something he absolutely hated. "Fine. Come in. I'm sure my mother would love to talk about Severus with you."

Harry felt pins and needles on his shoulders. He had only ever talked to Narcissa once, and he wasn't quite sure how he was supposed to survive this. But it was for Snape, so he steeled himself, and followed Draco anyway.

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Narcissa wrote Snape a letter. She had a lot to say but as she was on house arrest, Draco had to be used as a medium. It was easier taking Draco for the visit than it was getting Narcissa the Ministry-approved permission needed to accompany Harry Potter to the prison which held her husband. That just wasn't going to happen.

There were ridiculous guidelines about how many visitors one could have at once, and for how long, so it ended up with Draco taking 20 minutes of Harry's half an hour scheduled meeting.

Harry didn't know exactly what Draco was telling Snape in that time, but if it was anything like the chat he had with Narcissa, it was probably full of gratitude, and a plea for Snape not to squander the second chance he's been blessed with.

For some reason Harry hoped Snape was just as reserved around Draco as he was with him, but somehow he doubted that. It felt a bit selfish to think that.

Especially since Harry's 10 minutes spent in Snape's company were mundane.

Still waiting on the court date. He hoped Snape enjoyed the visit. Sadly, he couldn't arrange anything more mentally stimulating on such a short notice. Hopefully it cheered him up a bit. The upstairs bedrooms were done. After the first two, taking care of the rest came more easily. Thank Merlin for magic.

If Snape was glaring warily at him, Harry didn't mind. Snape hadn't shown any interest in him whatsoever until now, so having Snape's piercing eyes on him once more was almost a blessing in disguise.

And that was how Draco and he ended up sitting side by side in the small boat that would gently guide them to the mainland.

"Why did you bring me here?" Draco had shuffled to the very edge of the boat, refusing to be closer to Harry than necessary.

"I thought he could use a familiar face." Finding any explanation that sounded good outside of Harry's reasoning was more difficult than he had expected.

"So, you just feel bad for him? Why?" Draco barely glanced at him as he laid his hand over the side.

"I don't know. I have been visiting him for months, and if he talked to you, he probably told you what an idiot I have been." Harry honestly did not want to start an argument with Draco. Especially not on this small boat guided only by magic and fate. Harry wasn't even a good swimmer, so he tried not to lean out too far.

"He didn't say anything." Draco's voice was quiet as he looked at the extensive sea. "But if this is just guilt making you do this, then don't."

"I don't have to explain myself to you."

"You shouldn't get started with things you have no intention to go through with." Draco didn't elaborate but instead changed the subject. "What are you going to do with him once he's out?"

Harry was baffled. "Do? I don't know. Take him to St. Mungo's and escort him home, I guess." He hoped Snape would at least allow him to write. At least for however long it took to wean him off from his very necessary weekly vents.

"You idiot!" Draco spat, glaring at Harry with disdain. "What home?"

"Snape has a home. I mean, other than Hogwarts," Harry said with waning confidence. Didn't he? He had seen a house on his memories. He was pretty sure he did. It would make sense Snape still lived there, right? Not that the memories made it seem too welcoming, but it was in living condition, surely.

"Do you know what happens to property and assets once the owner is incarcerated?" Draco asked so flippantly it gave Harry whiplash.

"Erm, no?"

"In my father's case, his vault was frozen by the government on the basis of gaining financial benefit from whatever Death Eater philanthropy he did. Which is false, but it happened anyway. Since he knew about his court date beforehand, and it doesn't take a genius to guess the outcome, he actually had time to make plans, and move most of his wealth on to Narcissa's and my accounts. Severus, on the other hand, had no time for any preparations whatsoever, so his money is just sitting there. It's not as if he can access it from Azkaban." Draco flipped his hand, explaining this as he would to a toddler.

Draco left Harry no time to interrupt his upcoming speech. "So clearly, he didn't have time to appoint anyone the authority to manage his money and investments. I'm not saying I know how much mortgage the man has, but considering he has no income, comes from a poor family line, and has been kept in prison for several months now, with bad prep and the Ministry all over him... Don't you think the government has already seized it, as well as any other assets of his? He has the right to petition the government for the return of his properties, but considering the paperwork associated with that, he's on his own at least for several more months."

"He should have told me about that! I would have helped!" Harry yelled, as if this was his fault now.

"Cry me a fucking river! You wanted to help him, now you have, congratulations. So. What are you going to do with him? Point him to a hotel? Leaky Cauldron, perhaps?" Draco was yelling right back, both of them on edge. "You have been coddling him up there in prison, but you haven't given a single thought to what it will be like once he's out. The public will hate him. He doesn't have a place to stay. Your form of kindness is like a kick in the gut." It took Malfoy extreme patience to rein himself back. "And he's not okay. Not at all. He didn't talk. He needs medical attention. I don't think his mental facilities are all up there either. If you are only doing these visits out of misplaced guilt, then please stop. Just. Stop."

Reality was a cold shower down Harry's back. He just hadn't been thinking. Exactly as Snape had been accusing since the very first day. He desperately needed to make this right somehow. Snape would be released in little over a week.

"Well someone has to take him in."

"Who? We can't. Believe it or not, Mother would love the company, but the Ministry isn't going to let ex-Death Eaters congregate on the same property. If you are under some false belief that Severus has close friends willing to let him crash for a month or two, well think again." Draco scoffed. "Not that it's a good idea to leave him alone right now. He isn't well." Which was the understatement of the century.

"Shit." Harry did not swear often, but this moment deserved one. "Can't he stay at Hogwarts?"

"He might. McGonagall would probably let him. He would have treatment there. I'm just worried about the press. The press is going to have a field day when it's announced that Severus Snape has not only been pardoned, but he's staying at Hogwarts, too. All those ignorant soldiers of the light are going to love having him in the same building as their precious children. Not that Severus has ever had a good reputation in the first place," Draco explained, frowning. "It must really suck for him. I'm young, and apparently misguided. I can still take my NEWTs. I might even find proper employment and work my way up. Getting Dumbledore's murderer hired anywhere other than Hogwarts is a different challenge though. He would have to work independently, preferably with an alias of some kind. I bet he's all too aware of that, though," Draco grumbled. "Miserable bugger was always good at seeing the downsides of life."

Harry turned his gaze to the ocean, seeing the faintest promise of land in the far-off distance. Despite that he felt desolate, lost in the waves of uncertainty and doubt.

Snape must have thought Harry was mocking him. All that talk about finally living your life and pursuing your dreams, with the reality as it was... It must have felt like a kick to the ribs. No wonder Snape hated Harry's ignorance.

No. He must not give in like this. What did Malfoy know anyway? He was a spoiled child who had never worked a day in his life to achieve anything. Harry resolved to make sure Snape saw this through.

"I'll figure something out."

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"So, I have been thinking," Harry started, as he put the tea on the table.

Hermione was visiting over with the excuse of seeing how the renovations were going. They were still unfinished, but at least the rooms upstairs were starting to look habitable. She would start university in a couple more weeks, so she wanted to spend as much time with her friends as possible while she still had the time to.

Hermione took her tea with a splash of milk. "What about?"

"The whole Snape thing, mainly." Harry busied his hands with finding a tin of biscuits. "I was talking to Malfoy a while ago—"

"Since when do you talk to Malfoy? Harry, if you have made friends with him, you should have at least mentioned that before."

"We aren't friends! I gave his wand back!" The idea of being friends with that git was uncomfortable. "Sorry. I shouldn't have snapped like that."

"It's fine. So, what did you two get into now?" Hermione sighed.

"Erm." Oh, he's in it for now. "I asked him to visit Snape—"

"Why?" She took the biscuit tin from Harry and set it on the table so he would stop toying with it. She had yet to touch her tea.

"I don't know, just— The previous time I visited Snape he seemed worse than usual? Not like he's good to begin with, but maybe Azkaban is getting to him, I don't know. I thought maybe Malfoy's visit would help." Harry made himself tea with honey. He needed something to do with his hands.

"Okay. So you returned the wand and asked him to visit Snape in Azkaban. Is this what you wanted to tell me?"

"Well, not really. Malfoy and I were returning from there and we got talking. Malfoy had some legitimate points I hadn't thought of before. Practical things. Like what happens to Snape's property and his money while he's in prison?" Harry asked, hopeful that Hermione had some positive news to tell. Maybe Draco had been exaggerating.

"Well, it just sits there, I guess. Sometimes they freeze the bank account, but that only happens in special cases," Hermione explained as she hummed thoughtfully. "That means he has missed payment on every single bill he's been sent since last spring." She was picking up the potential threat, going through possible scenarios in her mind. "Either he had someone run his accounts, or he's in for quite a few late fees. What about it?"

"That's basically what Malfoy was saying. He also insinuated that the Ministry could have taken Snape's house under custody. They expected him to stay locked up for a long while, after all," Harry explained, his collar feeling tight around his neck. "So I went to the Ministry and asked the archivist for details about the property. The house is still in Snape's name, but the Ministry does have it detained. It might take a while to get all the paperwork sorted out if Snape wants all his stuff back. He would at least need to pay back all the missed mortgage payments, or sell it, I guess."

"Oh." Hermione frowned, her tea was growing cold. "So once he gets out, he's going to have several months' worth of bills to pay, no home, and no income either."

"Yeah, it seems pretty bad doesn't it? But it got me thinking, you know, he's going to need a place to stay. It's not as though he can afford to stay in the Leaky Cauldron for however long it takes for him to get a job, not to mention the medical issues he needs to take care of. And, uh, I have space. A lot."

Hermione shook her head. "No, Harry. You can't." She placed her hand on Harry's palm to press the issue.

"It wouldn't be for forever, only for a couple of months until he's back on his feet."

"No, Harry, listen. You don't even like him and he's going to be living with you all around the clock. Harry, don't you see? You're making this personal. I understand what you're trying to do, but you can't just drop everything for someone else. Especially not for someone who isn't going to thank you once he's back to his old self." Hermione made a lot of sense considering her outside perspective. Harry had been investing himself more and more with Snape, and if he went through with this, there was no way Harry could keep himself impartial.

As things were now, with Snape in Azkaban, Harry could walk away at any time. He could simply not attend the weekly visits unless he actually had something new to report. Any time he felt too restricted, he could still walk away with no weight on his conscience. If he took Snape into his own house, he wouldn't be able to back out if things got too heated between them. With Snape's notorious temper, they were bound to have many disagreements. Not to mention that the man did

come with a lot of baggage: his poor health, as well as the public's possible ire. It wouldn't be easy.

"I know." Harry swallowed. "Thinking about it is what I've been doing for most of the week."

"You've already made your mind up, haven't you?" Hermione sighed loudly. "You know Ron's going to flip?"

"Oh, I'm well aware of that. It's also why I wanted to talk to you first." Harry squeezed Hermione's hand reassuringly. He knew this was the most stupid, idiotic, crazy thing he could ever do.

Hermione bit her lip and watched Harry from under her furrowed brows. "Harry. You are absolutely insane, but if this is what you truly need to do, then fine. Just try not to get hurt. Snape was never a nice man." Harry could have leaped over the table to engulf her in a tight hug.

"At least you told us beforehand. If you had just brought him in straight from Azkaban, I would have your guts for garters."

"I know." Harry laughed. "So, are you going to help me explain this to Ron?"

"I suppose I must, mustn't I? I can at least make it sound necessary, instead of something you're doing just to help him." Hermione sniffed, before laughing herself. "Oh Harry, when I said taking care of something would cheer one up, I didn't mean this! You should have stuck with the plant!"

"Oh, I totally have the plant too." Harry explained happily while he settled back into his seat. "It's a prayer plant, and it just started making new leaves. They're still really tiny, but it's thriving!"

Hermione muffled her laughter with her sleeve, while observing Harry fondly. Whatever she found made her ask seriously: "Is there anything you need to tell me?"

Harry shook his head. "Not that I know of."

Hermione considered his words for a moment. "Okay. Just be careful. You've already made it too personal." She clapped her hands together. "Now, let's go tell Ron the no doubt surprising news!"

Chapter Two

The trial passed by with minimal fuss. Harry and Hermione had been prepared and their defense was sound. The result was exactly as they had expected, but it had taken a few extra days to get all the paperwork settled.

Now, with release papers clutched in his hands, Harry was readying himself to deal with Snape for the foreseeable future. He had bought Snape a new cloak, just in case Snape didn't have anything to wear.

"We need you to sign these and then we can go get him," the guard at the office told Harry. He patiently talked Harry through the forms for Snape's release, and overall gave off a professional image.

"Great. Now follow me." The guard stood up — Harry's wand and any other loose items safely secured behind the counter — before leading Harry into the prison.

"You should have him checked up once you get him out of here," the guard mentioned. "We have his updated medical record written up and included within his personal effects. We have treated him to the best of our abilities, but some of his wounds were too excessive for complete recovery."

"Nothing urgent or life threatening, I hope." Harry truly hoped Snape's throat wound was treated properly.

"Not per se. The wounds have all scarred over and closed properly. He's quite fatigued, but it's nothing some rest and a good meal won't fix. As you probably know, he hasn't been eating or exercising properly." The guard was navigating the maze of halls with familiarity. "It's good that he has a place to stay. Some of our inmates have to cancel their housing during their stay. It's a lot harder to reinstate them if they have a criminal record." The man calmly made idle chatter as they got further into the prison. With every step the air felt colder, staler and moister.

"I'm just glad to finally have him out of here. He didn't deserve to be here in the first place," Harry said with conviction.

"And here we are. Get that cloak you brought ready." The guard shuffled the keys.

"Congratulations Mr. Snape, you are a free man," he announced as he opened the door.

Snape sat up slowly, still curled up in his blanket. He had his knees lifted up to his chest, and he didn't attempt to stand up. When the guard reached over to help him, Snape hit his hand aside.

Harry felt as though he needed to do something. "Prof— erm. Sir. I brought you a cloak, just in case. Here." Harry handed it over, and Snape took it roughly.

Snape didn't even glance at him as he quickly put it on. Snape was sitting with posture so straight it almost looked intimidating. Harry wasn't sure if the messy, dirty hair, stone cold black eyes and grimy skin added or deducted from that illusion.

It certainly did make Harry feel like a stupid child, back in class with the evil bat of the dungeons.

"Let's go, then." Harry tried offering Snape his hand, but immediately pulled it back. If the guard did not get to assist him, Harry had no illusion of his own worth either. He backed away from the cell, and let the guard lead the way.

Snape was slow to follow, but he did, even if a little begrudgingly. He was firmly wrapped in his cloak; the collar was turned up to cover his neck entirely. He looked gaunt. He had always been skinny, but his stay in Azkaban had made him even more so. When he stood his knees shook minutely. Harry did not comment on it, but he did note it down. Snape was probably hiding his own weakness and exhaustion.

The walk back to the office was done in near silence. Harry was too nervous to say anything, and Snape was hardly likely to break the norm and speak now. Only the guard seemed unaffected by the thick tension building between the two.

Back at the office, Snape's breath had turned heavy and raspy. He was leaning slightly as he stood, and Harry had to admit that he was hiding his exhaustion quite admirably.

"Here are your items, Mr. Potter. I will be back with Mr. Snape's possessions in a moment," the guard said as he rounded the counter and disappeared to the back room.

The guard hadn't been gone for a minute before Harry cracked under the pressure. "Erm. I hope you won't mind if I take us to St. Mungo's before we go home?"

Snape only glared. Harry kept looking for any sign of an answer, as he awkwardly shifted his weight from one foot to another.

Snape gave the most minute of nods, and Harry sighed in relief, nodding to himself in assurance.

"Yeah. Okay, great. Once the boat takes us past the Anti-Apparition wards, I'll get us to the closest Apparition point. After we're done there, we can either take a detour through Gringotts, or go straight home and do that at a later date," Harry rambled. He hadn't even approached the topic of Snape's future residence, and he was already a mess.

He was saved from another exasperated glare by the guard.

"Everything should be here," the guard announced, placing down a box full of Snape's possessions. "Some of the items on your person have been destroyed by the court. The potions stashed in your inner pockets especially. Other than that, your wand is here, as well as everything else, including the clothes you wore at the time." The guard laid down the wand and stepped back to let Snape peruse the pile.

Snape pocketed most of the items in his new cloak. He glanced at the blood soaked garments and tossed them back in the box in mild disgust.

"Great. If there is nothing else you need, you only need to sign here, and you can leave." The guard brought out the form Harry had signed previously. He handed Snape a quill and a pot of ink and pointed at some key points in the form. "Please make sure all the info is filled in correct, and you are free to go."

Snape skimmed through the form and croaked roughly. His voice sounded broken, but Harry didn't even have time to contemplate that. Snape latched strongly onto the collar of Harry's robe, and shoved his face into the papers.

Snape tapped loudly at the current address section of the form. Harry blanched at Snape's mad expression.

"Erm, I can explain that. Sir." Harry tried to futilely pry Snape's hands off his clothes. For a man weak from Azkaban, he had one hell of a death grip. "Your house at Spinner's End is currently in government custody. They said you could appeal for it once you get all your bills paid," Harry

explained hastily underneath the tight collar. "It's not forever, but long enough for you to get back on your feet."

Snape shoved Harry away, and Harry nearly fell as he stumbled to balance himself.

Snape wiped his face, as if begging Merlin for patience.

"It's not all bad, you know," Harry said in an attempt to placate Snape, even if he was probably making it worse. "I'm renovating the place right now, but at least the guest bedroom is comfortable."

Snape ignored him, and angrily scribbled his name on the bottom. With that done, he stormed out of the building as if the hounds of hell were after him.

Harry was hot on his heels, worried that Snape would exhaust himself or get hurt before they even made it to St. Mungo's.

"I'm sorry. I know you must hate it but it's just for now, you know. I wouldn't feel right sending you out to a hotel. Not when you have so many other expenses to cover. Once you have your house back, you're free to leave, but at least now you got somewhere to stay," Harry tried to explain. Snape whipped around so fast it almost gave Harry whiplash.

Snape pointed his finger right at Harry's nose, and he looked almost deranged with frustration. He opened and closed his mouth, as if preparing to say something, before making a gurgled groan and running the rest of the way to the boat.

Harry forced his knees to unlock and scrambled after Snape. For a second there he thought Snape was going to strike him, but he was glad Snape had restrained himself. Maybe it would be best to keep his mouth shut until Snape had time to reorient himself.

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The boat ride had been filled with Harry's awkward silence and Snape's angry fuming. Snape refused to even look at him. He had curled up on the very front of the boat, as far from Harry as he could get, and refused any conversation despite Harry's efforts.

Even the side-along Apparition had been like pulling teeth. Snape knew he didn't have the strength or state of mind to pull it off himself, but he also refused to touch Harry. In the end, Harry had needed to grasp his wrist as though he was a child having a tantrum just to force him to Apparate.

The moment they landed on the side alley of St. Mungo's, Snape shook Harry's hand off as if it burned. Harry tried to not take it personally.

Thankfully they did not have to endure the ridiculously long waiting time at St. Mungo's. Harry had scheduled their appointment, so instead they had just enough time to fit in one more argument. Snape refused to let Harry join him during his appointment with angry hand gestures and a shake of his head.

"The Ministry caveat for your release was that they would need someone to look after you. And as your temporary caretaker, I have the right to know exactly what you're up against. Besides, if there are any problems in the future caused by your stubbornness it'll be my skin on the line. Like it or not, I'm responsible for you, since I was willing to vouch for you, I must be willing to bear the consequences too." He ducked away from Snape's reach. "You have to bear it for now."

Finally, Snape's name was called and he angrily stomped into the appointment room as Harry

hurried behind him. Snape ignored the Healer, but Harry shook hands with her.

Snape took the seat opposite the desk, which left Harry with the remaining seat in the corner of the room.

The Healer was an old woman with a tight bun and thin reading glasses, which she peered over when Snape and Harry were settled in their seats. "What is the reason of your visit today, Mr. Snape?" Her voice was kind but strict. She had an uncanny resemblance to Professor McGonagall; both of them could silence a rowdy bunch with a glance.

Snape dug his pockets for his medical record and tossed the stack on the table carelessly.

The Healer glanced at Harry uncertainly, who stuttered, "He just got freed from Azkaban. He's going to need a full medical. Those are his forms." Harry felt out of his element, but Snape's lack of speech unnerved him. There had been grunts and groans and frustrated growls, but no actual words. "Can you keep this a secret from the press, please?" he added as an afterthought.

"Of course, it's in my vows. Let's see what we have here." She reached for the stack of folded papers and began to read. She made small hums and clicks of her tongue and didn't look too pleased. "Well you are certainly correct to seek medical care. May I please see the wound?" she asked as she stopped perusing the papers.

Snape glared at Harry, as if silently commanding him to behave, before he reached to undo the fastenings of his cloak. He only lowered it enough to expose his wounded throat.

It was a mess. In the Shrieking Shack Harry had only seen blood — a lot of blood — as Snape clutched the wound. He had never seen the full extent of the damage as it was now. The wound had scarred over, but the scars were bigger than Harry had expected them to be. They were an angry red and uneven, covering most of one side of Snape's throat, and tapered down to his collarbone. There were several slashes where fangs had torn at the tendons on each strike. It looked as though Nagini had tried to tear a chunk from him.

Harry had to look away momentarily, unwilling to recall the event itself. He remembered the sounds and his own uselessness. He knew he had been too late but he had still tried to quell the bleeding. He remembered how his hands were covered in Snape's blood as he held the phial with the memories inside. He remembered Snape crying and begging, before losing consciousness.

All of that and now only angry, uneven scars were left.

"It seems to be healing as well as one would expect." The Healer moved closer to get a better look. "The wounds have closed nicely and there is no more inflammation. The report here says the Azkaban Healers managed to remove the poison during the emergency treatment, and that there were some difficulties with keeping the wound sterile..." She reached for her wand, and asked Snape's permission to do a more thorough scan.

Snape assented with a nod.

Harry had to intervene: "Could you tell me more about it? I don't know the full extent of the damage, I have only heard the reports about the healing progress."

The Healer sighed. "That's very unfortunate, Mr. Potter." She flicked her wand and colorful strands appeared. They wound up, molding around Snape's throat and, after another flick, they formed an exploded view of Snape's throat and its insides. There was one more flick and a quill began to write a full medical report on roll of what seemed like an infinite scroll of parchment.

The Healer moved over to the exploded view and gestured at it with her wand. "There is heavy scarring on the larynx and esophagus. The poison from the bite has created some lasting damage, but thankfully it's minimal." She pointed to the damaged areas briefly. Harry could see a lot of areas highlighted in different colors. "The Healers at Azkaban are actually quite remarkable at treating fatal wounds to keep the inmates alive. They prioritize survival over long term healing. Since they made sure that the wound is poison free and sealing properly, they have not paid much attention to possible side effects of heavy scarring."

"And what does that mean, exactly?" Harry wasn't really all too familiar with medicine.

"The scarred area is stiff and doesn't allow for much movement. In the esophagus in particular, it means that swallowing is challenging and might cause pain. The vocal cords are too stiff to vibrate, which makes speaking difficult. The damage in that area in particular might make certain sounds impossible," the Healer explained, while showing the damage. "The Healers' quick reaction and skill is probably the only thing that saved his life, but now that the wound has set, it's hard to reverse. I can prescribe a potions regime that will reduce the scarring. The potions should relieve pain and make swallowing easier. As long as he chews his meals properly, it shouldn't be a problem. It will take a couple of weeks until the pain is completely gone. I'm afraid there isn't much I can do for the voice box; the poison has eroded it too much. Vocal therapy might make talking easier if the patient is able."

"Oh." Harry felt a twinge of sympathy. Snape probably wasn't eating because of the pain. He wasn't talking, not because he chose to ignore Harry, but because his throat couldn't make the sounds he wanted anymore. Snape used to have a very refined voice, razor sharp tongue, and vast vocabulary at his disposal. If he was able to talk again, it wouldn't be the smooth drawl he was used to.

"Okay. So, what do we need to know? What do we do?" Harry asked, preparing himself mentally.

"We will begin with undoing some of the damage with potions. I recommend soups or easy to chew and swallow foods for the first two weeks." The Healer offered Harry an encouraging smile. "The exhaustion, malnutrition, and vitamin deficiency can be addressed by a healthy diet and rest. The healing has put a strain on his magic, but that should recover with time. A solid week of bed rest should do wonders. Once he has finished with the potions, there are some vocal exercises he can do to relearn speech."

The Healer wrote it all down and handed Harry her notes as well as the prescription.

"I understand this might be a huge change to adjust to, so please take your time. After you have recuperated from the fatigue, I recommend light exercising to build up stamina. I suggest getting in touch with a mental therapist as well as the vocal therapist, or at least have someone to talk to."

Harry was then given the full report, and he made a mental note to ask Hermione to explain it all to him.

"Right. Rest, proper meals, potions regime, and vocal therapy. That doesn't sound too bad." It could be worse. There could always be some incurable illnesses, broken bones and the common cough in the mix as well as all of this. "Wait, is there any way for him to talk? Do I need to buy a quick quotes quill? Can it quote without him saying anything?"

"Oh, a quick quotes quill should work fine. It's all about the mouth movement, and not the actual sound. There are also spells which let you write on air, if you prefer. I personally don't recommend using any spells at all until he has recuperated some of his magic first," the Healer said, and Harry nodded appreciatively. He had seen 16-year-old Tom Riddle write his name in air wordlessly, so it

couldn't have been that difficult. He would get Snape the quill for now so he could communicate while he heals.

"Thank you, Healer." Harry was truly grateful. At least now he knew where to start.

"You are very welcome." The Healer shook his hand again, and then offered it once more to Snape, who shook her hand forlornly.

Harry pocketed the potion prescriptions and healing instructions. It was a lot, now that he had it all in one place.

"Okay. Do you want to go somewhere, or straight home?"

Snape shook his head fervently, while leaning on the wall for balance. It took a moment for Harry to connect just what he was disagreeing with.

"Right. You must be tired. Let's go home, you can have a shower, and I'll make something to eat." Harry held his arm out for support, and then immediately pulled it back when Snape made a move to smack it. "I'll buy all of this stuff later, so we can get started on the potion treatment."

Snape snorted as he patted his own chest exactly once.

"No." Surprisingly, this one wasn't hard to understand at all. "You won't be brewing anything for at least two weeks. Grimmauld Place doesn't even have a place for you to brew. I can turn the basement into a lab, but I'm slow at the renovation spells. Why do you think I started with the bedrooms?"

Snape halted and Harry was fully prepared to get his ears wrung out for his insolence. He was surprised when no immediate punishment came.

Snape was glaring at him with contempt as he pointed against his own chest.

"You still want to brew them?" Harry guessed, and got a single firm nod in answer. "No. The Healer insisted on bed rest. There are enough potions on that list to take almost a week to brew. I won't let you."

Snape's glare was near murderous as he slashed his hand through the air in clear denial.

Harry groaned as he rubbed his eyes. "Is there any chance that Hogwarts has some of your old stock left?"

Snape stilled in thought and shrugged minutely. His nod was uncertain, and the raised brow was almost a question on its own. Harry had never before realized just how expressive Snape's face was. Not that Snape had ever bothered to hide his displeasure with anything. His expressions were subtle, but they were all so telling.

"I'm going to go and ask. If they don't have them, is there anyone you'd be okay with supplying the potions for you?" Snape sneered at the mere thought of having to rely on someone else's potions. "An apothecary?" Harry asked slowly, waiting for any sort of reaction from Snape. "A particular person?"

Snape rolled his eyes and pushed himself off the wall to keep on walking. Harry ran after him, quite certain Snape knew someone he would trust to brew for him, but refused to say who they were, and thus decided to leave.

"Hermione is good enough to brew a potion even up to your standards," Harry insisted, and Snape didn't even look at him as he shook his head. Harry could only tell his answer by the swing of his hair.

Harry bit on his tongue, stopping himself from saying anything uncouth. "Does it have to be a Slytherin for you to be sure they won't try to poison you? I can always say the potions are for myself."

Snape actually turned around to flick him on the side of his head, before continuing as if nothing had happened. It hurt. Snape's fingers were really bony.

"Bastard." Harry rubbed the smarting spot and reminded himself that it wouldn't be okay to retaliate against a person fresh from his hospital visit.

"Fuck it. I'll ask Malfoy personally, but you have to promise that you won't even try to brew anything for a week."

The glare Harry got was chilling, and easily translated into either, "You can't tell me what to do," or, "Try and stop me." Harry took Snape's lack of denial as an agreement.

"Even without saying anything you can be such an asshole," Harry grumbled low under his breath. For a moment there, Harry had assumed Snape to be somehow defenseless without his words, but obviously he had been grievously wrong.

Fudge may have used Snape's silence as an easy way to tip the trial against him, but Snape certainly did not allow anyone else to run his life for him. It was clear in the disapproving glare Harry got as Snape shouldered open the front doors.

Harry was quick to follow and didn't comment when Snape reached his hand out to allow Harry to Apparate them both.

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"I need to key you to the wards and then you are free to do whatever you want." Harry gestured to the front door.

Snape laid his hand against the door without prompting. Harry made sure the wards would let him in even if Harry wasn't home himself, or if Snape didn't have the key. He lived here now, and the house better know it.

Snape did not wait for an invitation before he wrenched the door open and marched inside as if he owned it. For some reason it rubbed Harry the wrong way, but he refused to get riled up about it.

"Right. You know the place already. It's a bit bare since I moved everything to the attic. Your room is the previous master bedroom." Harry had expected Snape to stay and listen to whatever tour Harry had built up inside his head, instead Snape headed straight for the stairs and up to his room. He didn't even spare Harry the time of day.

"Or you can just do whatever the fuck you want. I don't care," Harry growled quietly as he headed to the kitchen himself.

He had promised food and he would be damned if he didn't provide at least that. He was tempted to write an owl to Hermione but decided to keep his complaints to himself and visit her in person later.

"Kreacher!" Harry turned on the stove and filled a pot with water. Kreacher answered his call in a minute.

"Snape is going to stay here for a while. He can't talk, but can you look after him? He's supposed to be on bed rest for a week and taking it easy afterwards. If he needs something, can you please take care of it?" Harry hoped that Kreacher was willing to cooperate with him here.

"Master Harry should let Kreacher cook." Harry rolled his eyes.

"Promise me, Kreacher," Harry insisted, and Kreacher grumbled loudly until he offered a grudging agreement. Harry was sure Kreacher would check up on Snape, even if he wasn't happy about it.

"You can cook in the future if you want, but Snape needs to have easy to swallow food. His throat isn't fully healed yet," Harry explained as he prepared ingredients for a creamy chicken soup with lots of vegetables and mushrooms.

"Master Harry should not be cooking," Kreacher complained, as he took over the task of chopping vegetables.

"I can cook." Harry was actually decent at cooking. He rarely followed a recipe, but he knew his way around the stove. Kreacher just hated the idea of the master of the house making his own food when he had servants about. Harry switched the topic. "What is Snape doing?"

"Is taking a bath. Went straight for upstairs bathroom."

Harry nodded. Snape needed it. And he probably needed fresh clothes, too. Oh, Harry probably should have thought about that. For some reason he had expected Snape to have a couple more possessions than just his wand and wallet. Maybe he had some of his possessions left at Hogwarts?

"Do we have any clothes his size? Clean, intact ones, I mean. Not moth eaten rags left over from long dead ancestors."

Kreacher scoffed, taking offense. "There be no clothes for a filthy half-blood to use. Maybe Sirius left old clothes," Kreacher sniffed, and made a long withering sigh.

"Right." Harry ignored Kreacher's comment on half-bloods. Obviously Snape would refuse anything previously worn by Sirius out of spite if nothing else. "Not even one of Regulus's?"

Kreacher looked as if Harry had uttered a blasphemy.

"Fine. But are you sure there isn't anything? Not even a shirt?" Harry filled the boiling pot with ingredients, stirring it while he waited for it to cook. "At least make sure he has a clean towel."

"Kreacher is not being happy with this," Kreacher repeated as he popped upstairs to take care of it.

Harry wasn't sure if Kreacher could hear it, but Harry thanked him anyway.

Once the food was done, he put a generous helping of it in a bowl. He took it upstairs with a glass of milk, and some fresh bread to dip with. He shouldered open the door to Snape's room, and went to set the tray on the bedside table. There was no-one in the room.

"Snape?" Harry glanced around, but it didn't look as though he had even stepped into the room. "Kreacher?"

The elf popped up without a delay.

"Where's Snape?"

"He hasn't left the bathroom," Kreacher informed him, and Harry glanced at the nearest timepiece. Nobody showers this long. Either he fell asleep in the bath, or he's unconscious on the floor.

Harry sighed. "I'll check on him."

He rubbed his face, already feeling more tired than he should. He spelled a preservation charm on the meal as an afterthought, and walked straight to the upstairs bathroom, and knocked on the door loudly. "Snape!" He knocked again but heard no answer. The only sound came from the still-running water.

He contemplated his options for a moment, trying the door handle. It was locked, and he was sure that Snape would have heard all this racket if he was in there. He had plenty of time to reach the door.

Harry cast a spell to knock the door open.

The bathroom floor was covered in water, which was overflowing from the tub. The drain on the floor was doing its best, but the water reached to the walls. Harry didn't even take off his socks as he rushed over to turn off the tap. The boiler had long since run out of hot water, and Snape was lying unconscious in the middle of the tub. Luckily, he hadn't submerged. It looked more as though he had fallen asleep in exhaustion.

"For fuck's sake." Harry didn't know what to do. Obviously Snape hadn't even gotten to washing up yet, but he had used all the hot water. He had to pull Snape up from the tub before he froze and caught a cold.

"Kreacher!" Harry called again as he pulled at Snape, who slapped sleepily at him, grumbling and protesting. "Help me pull him up."

Kreacher snapped his fingers to help levitate Snape from the tub. Harry pulled a small wooden stool from the corner and settled Snape on it. "Get me a towel and boil me some water. Bring it up here when you are done." Harry held Snape upright as he instructed Kreacher. Harry's clothes were soaked through. He would have to change before he could leave to run errands. All of this was such an inconvenience.

He sighed and prayed for strength.

"Snape, wake up." Harry shook his shoulder and only got incoherent grumbling in response as Snape once again tried to swat at the annoyance. He missed, obviously, but Harry hoped he was awake enough to hear him out. "You fell asleep in the tub. I'll clean you up and take you to bed."

Harry used one hand to prop Snape up and reached to drain the tub with the other. He then filled a bucket with water and searched for a soap and sponge.

Kreacher came back with a teapot full of hot water and a towel. Harry groaned loudly. It was his own fault for not being more precise. "I'm going to need a bucket full of hot water, but this is a start. Thank you." He could bet that Kreacher was doing this just to be petty. He still wasn't happy that Harry had brought in yet more of "Half-bloods and blood traitors" into the house.

"Master should be more clear when making orders," Kreacher sniffed and laid down the things he had brought. Even the towel, which Harry had to lift up to wait on the sink before it soaked in all the water on the floor.

"Next time come and get me if you notice Snape is feeling poorly," Harry warned, but Kreacher didn't stay to be berated.

Harry groaned as he reached for a water bowl and poured the hot water in. He mixed cold water in until he had the temperature just right, then moved to sit behind Snape. He poured just enough water on Snape's hair to get it wet and let Snape rest against his front as he rubbed Snape's hair clean. It took several rinses, and Kreacher had brought him more hot water in the meantime.

He made sure to clean well behind the ears, and he discovered that Snape's hair felt almost like velvet. It was thick and heavy, and even when clean it still lay flat and straight, sticking together as it had back in class.

At one point Snape had roused for long enough to elbow Harry on the gut while protesting loudly, but he fell asleep not long after.

"I can't believe I'm doing this for you," Harry mumbled as he wetted the sponge. He knew he could have just carried Snape to bed and let him clean up another time, but he had months' worth of Azkaban dirt caked in layers on his skin.

Harry started from Snape's shoulders, moving his way to Snape's back. His movements were near mechanical, circling around with the sponge until he could barely see the skin thanks to the muddled foam. He had quite efficiently managed to disassociate himself from what he was actually doing, considering it more a task than actually paying attention on who he was washing and why. There was a rapid stop to that when Harry reached Snape's front.

"You can get your own bits on your own time. I am not even going there." Harry tried to get back to the previous mind space. Don't even think of it as skin, it's just like cleaning up any other object, such as dishes, or a car, or literally any inanimate object that hasn't tried to teach you Potions, called you an imbecile, and chucked a jar of dead cockroaches at you.

If Snape were awake for this, he would rather strangle Harry than live this down.

Harry pulled Snape's arms up to clean his armpits. Snape was like a rag doll. His head was lolling to the side, and Harry had to adjust it to rest on his shoulder so there wouldn't be any awkward cricks in his neck later.

"You should have just gone to bed if you were this tired." To be fair, Harry probably would have insisted on the same. Azkaban probably had communal showers, and he couldn't say that he was a fan of sharing space with people he knew had done something to deserve prison time. Snape was probably looking out for himself, in his own way. After all, he was injured, mute, and fatigued.

Harry laid Snape's hands on his lap to rest, and then massaged Snape's hands one at a time to get the dirt off his fingers. Snape's nails could use a clipping and there was a whole micro ecosystem beneath his fingernails. Harry scrambled for the nail brush on the sink and cleaned Snape's hands to the best of his abilities. The cuticles were torn and shabby, but at least they were now clean. Snape could cut his own nails.

And then for the rest. Harry struggled to lift Snape gently off the chair to prop him against the tub while he got his front. Snape had hair on his chest and arms, and Harry tried to not be amused by the shapes the sponge drew on him while he scrubbed. His body was littered with old scars and even burns. Thankfully, most were small, but there were still so many of them that it was sobering. Harry lifted up one foot at a time to get both sides clean and repeated the process with the nail brush on Snape's toes. During the whole process Harry maintained constant tunnel vision to the area he was working on, because some things he just did not want to know.

The rest Snape could clean by himself. At least now he wouldn't wake up with his sheets gathering a small desert of dirt from his skin.

Harry rinsed Snape off by slowly pouring water on Snape and using the sponge to make sure he got all the dirt and soap off. He then rubbed him dry and swaddled him in a towel.

Harry asked Kreacher to move Snape to the bed and, since Kreacher had failed to find Snape anything to wear, it was up to Harry to secure him something.

He found an old shirt which used to belong to Sirius, with a rock band logo on the front, and a pair of dark blue underpants. He was pretty sure Snape would have a fit about it later, but it was either this, or he slept naked. Once he had his own clothes, he could wear what he wanted.

Harry returned to the guest bedroom and saw that Kreacher had put Snape on the bed. He hadn't even bothered to put Snape under the covers. Whatever, it was easier this way.

Harry pulled off the towel and clothed Snape as efficiently as he could before covering him up. Snape was still sleeping, dead to the world, but even in sleep he looked disgruntled. It was either all the jostling, or he knew nothing about relaxing.

Harry fetched a small notebook and a pen, which he used to write Snape a note:

"I'm off to Hogwarts to get your potions. I will ask for your things while I'm there. Please eat once you wake up. If you need anything, knock on the bed frame. I told Kreacher to check up on you. There are leftovers in the kitchen," Harry mumbled aloud as he wrote. Once he was done he flipped the spiral notebook so that the note was on top. He set it on the tray next to the soup bowl so that Snape would find it.

After he was done, he took a shower and changed his clothes. He instructed Kreacher to make sure Snape would eat and get everything else he needed. Harry said he would be back by 8pm at the latest, and to heat up some leftovers for him once he got back.

He felt a bit unsure of leaving Snape alone, but reminded himself that Snape was an adult, and fully capable of looking after himself, the recent fainting spell notwithstanding.

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Madam Pomfrey had most of the potions on the list in stock. The more common ones she had run out of during the battle, and Harry made note to update the list. She was really glad that Harry had taken up the task of helping Snape.

She and Snape had been friends, of a sort. They got talking while Snape delivered potions to the hospital wing. They usually had similar gripes about students getting themselves in trouble, which led to heated debate over which treatment would be the most efficient. Snape always knew a potion that could do the job of a mediwizard spell. While Pomfrey did not always agree, she was glad to hear opposing ideas to broaden her repertoire.

She also came with heaps of advice on how to treat Snape. She had nursed him several times and knew from experience just how foul a patient he could be. It helped to know the little ins and outs, and the way Snape thought about things. It also didn't hurt to be armed with actual advice on how to best treat Snape's current symptoms.

Pomfrey encouraged Harry to contact her if he ever needed any help, and Harry swore to take her up on that offer.

His next stop was to visit McGonagall.

McGonagall had taken over the headmaster's position, and she was currently very busy with the starting year. She had been deputy headmistress for years now, but she was still nervous about taking up such a big title. Not that she would ever allow her students to know that.

She congratulated Harry on getting Snape freed, and reminded him to mention that the doors of Hogwarts would always be open to Snape if he ever needed to come back for whatever reason. She reminisced of the days Snape used to study here, and how it just wouldn't be the same without the resident grump stalking the halls anymore.

McGonagall had preserved Snape's rooms just as they had been before and helped Harry pack up everything.

Literally everything. It appeared that Draco had been right about the Ministry trying to make sure Snape couldn't stay at Hogwarts without a job on the property. Since Minerva was the new headmistress, that had left Snape out of position, and as he hadn't applied for teaching the upcoming term, his previous position was now taken.

"It's all humbug I say," Minerva sniffed as she transfigured a chest. "The Ministry is being so petty. I know they are just looking out for themselves. After the war the public has been at unrest. With the Death Eaters still being rounded up, everyone is so shaky." She used a spell which made all the furniture dance over to the chest, then shrink to fit inside. An extension charm made sure everything could fit inside a single chest which was small enough to fit under Harry's arm. "They are afraid of a possible stir that the *Prophet* could cause. If the *Prophet* decided to make it into a scandal that Severus was continuing teaching despite his short stay in Azkaban, the people would naturally panic. And if the people panic, then they are forced to do something about it. Not that there is much they can do. Even now, I could hire Severus back here in a heartbeat. Nothing is stopping me. I'm just not sure if it's the best idea to put Severus through that. Not this soon, at the very least."

She hummed as she used complex spells to preserve all of Snape's private stock of ingredients. She set them inside the trunk slowly and carefully. "Maybe Kingsley is protecting Severus, in his own way. Some at the Ministry might be doing this with less than honorable intentions, but Kingsley has always been a good man. Sure, it might reflect badly on the Ministry if they allowed a suspected Death Eater to teach, but just imagine all the hazing Severus would go through. Not that he even liked teaching. Whatever blackmail Albus had on the poor boy must have been monumental."

Harry nearly choked on his own spit. He chose not to comment.

"That should be everything in here. Let's take a tour through his personal lab as well," Minerva said as she opened a secret passage to travel further inside. The lab was in pristine condition, with a huge cauldron in the middle, and several smaller ones of different material stashed away in reserve. There were worktables fit for professionals, and the latest equipment for smoothest execution; vials of every size; and tools, knives and ladles fit for every purpose. There were notes everywhere in neat stacks, and books shelved high. Anyone could see the space was well cared for. It was kept clean, well-organized, and, most of all, always ready to use.

"Snape often used the school budget for research. Mostly for the hospital wing, so, sadly, all of this is Hogwarts property," Minerva explained, as she tugged back her sleeve and lifted her wand. "It's even more of a shame that the Death Eaters spared none of it in their brutal attack." She proceeded to shrink and preserve everything. Mortars and burners flew into the chest she held open on her other hand. She winked at Harry with a playful, gentle smile. "Consider it a farewell gift. Take care

of him for us, Harry."

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After Hogwarts, Harry visited the Malfoys. Narcissa was getting a touch of cabin fever and invited Snape to visit as soon as he was able. Draco was glad that someone was taking care of Snape, but he worried about Snape's mental health. It seemed Snape had not really made any plans for after the war, nor had he ever truly expected to survive.

It was worrying, but Harry made a note to observe the situation.

He thanked Draco, who promised to owl him the potions once he finished.

On the way home Harry made one last stop to buy some quick quotes quills and whatever he thought Snape would need from spare toothbrushes to other everyday things. He also bought groceries.

With everything he was carrying, he was glad Kreacher had been waiting for him on his return to Grimmauld Place.

"Could you unpack the groceries for me? I'm starving," Harry announced as he carried the bags into the kitchen. He had everything he bought for Snape in a separate bag, so he set it aside with the rest of Snape's belongings. He would take them upstairs after he ate.

He was infinitely grateful for Kreacher, even if he did get a twinge on his conscience about it.

"How has Snape been?" Harry asked around his mouthful of soup.

"Has been sleeping, he has. Woke up once for toilet and eat soup. Went right to sleep afterwards and did not talk to Kreacher." Kreacher sounded as if it was an offense now, that he hadn't been called upon at all even if he had been asked to be available. Harry knew that he would only gripe more if he had indeed been asked for.

It was good that Snape had been resting as he was supposed to. It didn't really seem like the difficult task Poppy had made caring for Snape out to be. "He's been sleeping the whole day?"

"Very lazy of him, but Master said he is to be resting. He is resting a lot." Kreacher sounded defensive, and Harry gestured with his hands that it was fine.

"It's fine, Kreacher. I'll check on him later. I just wanted to know how he is."

Kreacher nodded and went back to unpacking the groceries.

When Harry had finished his dinner, he gathered his things.

"Oh, and Kreacher. If it's not too much trouble, could you clear out the basement? It's not urgent but I would appreciate it."

"Is basement also being renovating?" Kreacher turned around, eyes round and curious.

"Yeah. I was thinking a potions lab."

"Is good for potions. Arcturus had lab in basement. Melanie did not like laboratory to be upstairs, so it was built under kitchen. Walburga turned it into a cellar."

"Good man, Arcturus." Harry had no idea who he was and didn't particularly care. The Black

family tree could keep its secrets for yet another day. "I'll be upstairs."

Harry climbed up the creaky stairs and knocked softly on Snape's door. He got no answer, so he knocked a bit louder. It was getting late, and Snape had been asleep the whole day. Either he had been really tired, or he was ignoring him.

Harry weighed his options. He did want to check up on him, and he did have all these items as a convenient excuse for a quick in and out just to drop them off. If Snape was asleep, he could just leave a note.

Mind made up, Harry quietly opened the door and sneaked in without turning on any lights.

Snape was sleeping. Harry could tell by his breathing, but it didn't really sound as calm and even as he had expected. He slowly came closer, and set the items down next to the bedside table, before taking a closer look.

Snape's skin was clammy and pale, except his cheeks were flushed. His hair was sticking to his forehead thanks to all the sweat, and his eyelids were red. Harry frowned, and reached to brush the hair off his forehead, which was hot to the touch.

Figures. Snape had fallen asleep in the bath for who knows how long. He must be running a fever. He might even have caught something from St. Mungo's.

Harry tried to be quiet as he Accioed a thermometer. It made slight scratching at the doorjamb, but otherwise arrived without a sound. It was an old mercury thermometer, so Harry cast cleaning spells on it, before gently tapping Snape's shoulder. Harry didn't want to find out what an ex spy would do when someone tried to slip something in their mouth while they were unconscious.

Snape gave a loud snore as he jolted awake, eyes hazy and frantic as if looking for an attack.

"I'm going to take your temperature. Don't bite off my fingers." Harry waved the thermometer to further accentuate his point. "You can go back to sleep."

Snape made a groan of protest, which Harry used as a tactical moment to place the thermometer under his tongue. It seemed that Snape would spit it right out, but only shifted it to the corner of his mouth.

Harry cast a Tempus to count out two minutes and went to fetch Snape a bowl of soup and a jug of cold water to drink. If Snape was running a fever, he would need plenty of fluids. Harry was now doubly thankful for making chicken soup today.

When Harry was back upstairs, he checked the time, placed the food on the bedside table, and took out the thermometer.

Snape's temperature was peaking, but Harry didn't even remember if he had any medicine in the house.

Harry shook Snape awake once more, this time getting even more disgruntled groan as his response. The glare was threatening but lacking its usual heat.

"Your fever's at 38.9 degrees Celsius. I brought you some more soup and some water. Try to eat. I'll have Kreacher stay with you while I go get you some medicine," Harry explained, as he Accioed a towel, and cast an Aguamenti on it. He folded it and laid it down on Snape's forehead. "Rest all you need, I'll cast a preservation charm on your meal."

Harry did just that and then summoned Kreacher.

After a quick inquiry, he now knew that most of their potions had already run past their date, and the only thing he had were some spare painkillers Hermione had left behind. He gave Snape one, and was slightly surprised to find out he took them without complaint. He even sipped some water without trying to knock Harry's hand away. The immediate shivers Snape got after rising up from his cocoon proved that he just wanted the whole ordeal to be done faster.

Harry instructed Kreacher, "Look after him while I visit the Weasleys. I'll be right back."

Harry was almost out the door, when he immediately made a turn back. "And give him these. They're his potions from Madam Pomfrey. The instructions are written down here," Harry said, handing Kreacher a piece of parchment before pulling out the potion vials. He set them on the bedside table behind the tray of food.

"I'll be back soon," Harry promised both of them before he made a dash for the fireplace.

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The quick visit to the Burrow yielded pockets full of Pepperup, a stomach filled with tea and scones, and a mind full of Molly's advice. She assured Harry he could always come back for anything, no matter how late it got.

Now properly prepared, Harry knocked on Snape's door and, the minute Kreacher saw his opening, he left in a resounding crack, startling Snape awake.

"Sorry. Kreacher takes a while to get used to people. I got you some Pepperup Potion," Harry announced as he held out the bottle. Snape took it and held it between two fingers as he squinted at Harry. "I got it from Molly, it's fine. Drink up."

Snape did, and the steam made his hair flutter. Harry tried to rein in his smile.

"Have you eaten?" Stupid question really, since the bowl was still full. "You should, so you can get better. Are you awake enough to talk for a bit?" Harry pulled himself a chair nevertheless.

Snape rolled his eyes and opened and closed his mouth with angry talking motions as he reached for his soup. Harry could easily hear the mocking, despite no words being said. Imbecile child being a key phrase.

"Which reminds me." Harry reached for the bag of shopping he brought earlier and got the brand-new quill out. "You can use this for now. I also got you whatever necessities you might need. Feel free to go through all of that whenever." Harry placed the quill on the bedside table, and placed the bag back down, and then reached for the chest. "McGonagall helped me pack something for you to wear, so naturally she put your entire chambers at Hogwarts in here as well. She even packed your personal lab in here. She said it was a parting present." Harry opened the box lightly to let Snape see that everything he owned was indeed inside.

Snape put aside his bowl to reach for the chest. He held it almost reverently as he perused the insides, probably making sure everything was in there. He traced a tiny cauldron with the tip of his finger, and for a second Harry was sure he saw something in Snape's eyes. Something soft, but not quite a smile.

"I can make you a lab in the basement, but I won't let you anywhere near it until next week. You need spells to finish potions, and I won't let you cast any if I can help it."

Snape glared, but it lacked the meanness it was famous for. Instead of trying to intimidate Harry some more, he closed the chest gently, and laid it beside his pillow. Harry assumed he wanted it close to himself. Snape then reached for the quill and notebook and licked the tip before dipping it in ink. He wrote something on the paper before the quill jumped off of his fingers to resume writing on its own. Snape tossed the notebook on Harry's lap, not caring if the corner jabbed quite unpleasantly at Harry's stomach. He then proceeded with his half-finished meal.

When Harry reached to straighten up the notebook, he noticed his hands were actually shaking. It wasn't nervousness as much as excitement. This was the first thing Snape has said to him. They had been at this for months, and finally they were about to have a conversation.

"Why are you doing this?" it said.

Harry furrowed his brows. "Which part? Or like, all of it? Why are you here? Why am I bringing you soup and making sure you get your stuff back?"

Harry was even more confused as an itemized list began to form.

- "1. Why did you keep visiting me in Azkaban?*
- 2. What made you visit in the first place?*
- 3. What did you possibly want to gain from it?*
- 4. Why did you go into such great lengths just to free me?*
- 5. Why did you bring me here, when you could have easily tossed me at St. Mungo's and been done with it?*
- 6. Why are you still taking care of me? I fainted in the bath for fuck's sake."*

Harry's first thought was "Snape said fuck," since it was hard to remember that teachers weren't in their teaching mode all around the clock, and the second was that Snape had a lot of difficulty accepting any act of kindness.

"Well, to quote you, I'm an idiotic Gryffindor." That actually answered more of these questions than Harry found comfortable.

"Okay, so. How about Number Two first? The moment I found out you were there, I had to fix it. After seeing your memories it didn't really sit well with me at all to just leave you there. Which gets us to Number One: I admit, I may have wanted to hear about my mum, but that passed really fast if I'm honest. You weren't really forthcoming with conversation, and even I'm not that stubborn. So, uh, my reason's really stupid. It's actually right up there with everything you ever said about me kind of stupid." Harry felt his neck growing hot. He pushed his glasses further up his nose just for something to do. There was no way he could admit he kept visiting Snape only to rant at him. It must have been the stupidest thing he has ever done, and now he had to try and explain it in a way that made sense.

"I just..." Harry tried to collect his thoughts, to wrap all the wisps of ideas into one neatly wrapped package. "It was pretty tough after the war," Harry admitted. He kept his eyes on his feet, because not even his Gryffindor pride was enough to face Snape right now. "I know we didn't really talk about it, or I didn't really talk about it, whatever. The point is that I did die for a moment there. There was this whole thing with King's Cross and Dumbledore, and this baby Voldemort thing that was in there. I'm still not sure if I hallucinated the whole thing. But my parents were there. And it was kind of peaceful, but—" Harry bit his lip. "They let me choose if I wanted to come back. Of course, the choice was obvious back then. I mean, I had unfinished business; Voldemort was still alive and I wanted to make sure my friends were okay. I didn't really even think about it that much. I just went and did it. And after that it was so chaotic with trials and the press going crazy and—" Harry was blabbering rather fast so he took a deep breath to calm himself. "It was too much

happening all at once."

It truly had been but he tried not to think about it. It had got a lot better since then, but he still got mobbed if he went to Diagon Alley and seemed even remotely okay with answering questions. Sometimes it didn't seem worth coming back to. But seeing Ron, Hermione, and the rest of his friends — and even the strangers who needed his help — reminded him why he came back.

"After things calmed out a bit and I had a moment to just sit down and think about it, it hit me all at once. So many people were dead or injured, and everyone was so busy. The Ministry was tugging at both my arms while the press was hanging onto my legs. I was trying to juggle my relationship with Ginny back then, too, but I barely had my own head straight. And then the whole Ministry thing with me having to attend all kinds of stupid fundraisers, and giving speeches — god knows I'm bad at talking."

Snape actually snorted. Honest to god snorted.

"Yeah, I know. So it was pretty clear they wanted me as the poster boy and not a valuable worker. And if I was the face for something like that then I'd have to act like it. No. Just, no. Let's be real here. I survive on sheer dumb luck and determination. Aurors are supposed to have all kinds of guidelines, and I won't be skating that ugly line." Harry took another deep breath. He actually had not even planned on going this far. He was just supposed to recap things, and not explode into a rant, but that was just how things worked when he got a free pass to finally talk to someone who couldn't correct his behavior for him.

"And that's why I kept coming. Because I don't give a fuck if you listen or not. I just needed to get this off my chest, because apparently I was going nuts. Hermione said I was secluding myself, only going out for necessities but let's be real here, the world out there is insane."

Snape was starting to seem a bit tired, weary with his illness, but he had managed to finish his food while Harry was busy emptying his chest.

The quill jumped gracefully as it wrote: *"Not out in the real world for half a year, and already your life is falling apart at the seams. Quite a shock for the golden boy, indeed."*

"Don't you start with me. Number three," Harry powered on admirably. "Oh. Actually I've covered that quite well, haven't I? It was pure selfishness on my part. Number four: Believe it or not, but when you have deep, meaningful talks about your life with someone for months, you kind of start forming a bond." Harry blinked. "Did I just say that out loud? That sounds weirder than I thought it would. Whatever. I'm invested now. Deal with it."

"Number five. That's actually a long story," Harry started, and rubbed his chin. "Draco and I are on a first name basis now; you should be proud. I asked him to come visit you and on the way back, we got to talking. Draco's actually really clever with all these legal things, because I hadn't even thought that your house could have been confiscated. Or that your bills were behind. Or whatever. I thought I'd get you out, you'd be off home, and I'd send you owls every week which you'd ignore in favor of keeping your fireplace warm. I know you could have stayed at Hogwarts — McGonagall said she'd take you back — but both she and Draco are certain it's not worth the public backlash. So, here you are, since Malfoy Manor is apparently not on the Ministry's hot list for an ex-Death Eater hostel." Even Harry was feeling tired, which didn't help his jumbled thoughts and incessant rambling.

"Last one." Harry was happy to finally reach this point. Maybe after this he could go to sleep. "I'm just happy to have you free. I know you can be a mean bastard at times, but you did me a favor by hearing me out. Not to mention you've saved my life more times than necessary. It goes without

saying that I should at least return this much. A lot of people missed you. Madam Pomfrey, McGonagall, Narcissa Malfoy... even Draco's worried, and I never thought he'd be the type. You have more people that care for you than you think, and we all want you back on your feet." Harry yawned loudly and glanced at the clock. It was already eleven at night.

Harry heard the scratch of a quill on paper.

"You all think too highly of me."

"Nah. I think it's just you who thinks too lowly of yourself. You should have heard Minerva. She said the Death Eaters stormed your lab!" Harry pointed at the chest which they both knew held the lab in its entirety.

"I served my purpose. I avenged Lily and you are still alive. I did what I was set out to do. I don't even know what to do now that I'm no longer teaching or spying."

Snape's eyes were drooping, so Harry stood up. Harry made sure everything was set aside on the bedside table before pulling Snape's cover up and gently pushing Snape's shoulder to make him lie down.

"Anything you want, Snape. You are free now — this is your reward. Make of it what you will." Harry felt Snape's forehead. It was still a bit warm but had cooled down some. He replaced the cloth with a fresh one, before heading out. "Good night, and rest well."

Harry wasn't far behind falling asleep himself. He didn't even change properly. He just pulled off his outerwear, fell face first into his bed, and was asleep within moments.

Chapter Three

Waking up at 4:00 in the morning to an unholy shriek almost gave Harry a heart attack. It sounded near demonic, and it took a moment for Harry to get his bearings. The second he realized that he was home alone in the middle of the night, he grew worried, until he heard distorted sobs. He finally remembered that he wasn't the sole resident in this house any more, and he immediately scurried off to see what was wrong with Snape. He didn't even stop to pull on clothes.

Snape was tangled up in his sheets and wailing. His voice sounded extremely hoarse and altered in pitch; it cracked and altered in pitch as he sobbed. He was curled up tight as if trying to defend himself from something. Harry wasn't even sure if Snape was awake or not, but he ran over to wake Snape up nonetheless.

He ran his hand over Snape's forehead, which was burning up, and gently shook Snape's shoulder.

"Snape, wake up. It's just a dream," Harry assured him, pulling Snape up so that he could sit.

Snape took in a shaky gasp of breath, and Harry could see his eyes frantically searching the air around him.

"Shh, it's okay. I got you." Harry didn't even think about it as he sat on the edge of the bed and gathered Snape in his arms. He held Snape lightly, petting his hair. "It's okay. You are at Grimmauld Place with Harry. You left Azkaban yesterday. And the war is over. You are alive, and everything is fine," Harry reassured Snape with a soft voice.

Now that Snape was up, he was growing stiff with apparent embarrassment, even though his breath was still labored and his tears were staining Harry's t-shirt.

"Don't think about it for now. It's fine."

Harry called Kreacher to bring them each a glass of warm milk. He then climbed on the bed so that he could sit beside Snape with their backs against the headboard. Snape tried to pull back, so Harry gently reassured him that it was fine and he should take his time. Snape seemed to hover uncertainly, but the fatigue made him slump. Harry gathered Snape close so that his arm was behind Snape's back, and Snape's head against his collar. He rubbed Snape's shoulder as he waited for the milk to arrive.

"Do you want to talk about it? You don't have to, but sometimes it helps," Harry asked, but Snape shook his head. "It's fine if you do. I promise not to tell a soul. You listened to me, so now you can cash in the favor."

Snape remained silent for a long while until finally he gestured to the bedside table. Harry picked up Snape's quill and notebook and handed them over. Snape licked the tip of the quill before starting it off and handing Harry the notebook.

"It was the snake again," Snape started. Even the quill's handwriting seemed a bit shaky.

Harry continued with his gentle petting and brushed the loose hair back behind Snape's ear.

"It attacked me relentlessly. I was choking on blood. There was so much, and I could taste it. I was afraid I would choke to death. Instead of black, it all faded into green."

"I woke up in a cold, lonely cell. It didn't have windows or doors, just stone walls. It was tiny, with

a low ceiling, and it was full of snakes. I tried to get away by climbing on the bunk, but they came after me. They bit at my ankles and my hands as I tried to hit them off. I tried to scream for help, but no-one could hear me. No-one came." Harry read patiently, not trying to hurry Snape, and make him clam up. He needed to take his time.

"I thought I had died, and this was my purgatory. I could see—" Snape sobbed silently, only the hitch of his breath audible. *"I could see the others who had died. Albus was there too, he didn't say anything, but his eyes were so cold and I could see the blame in them."* Snape sniffed, and Harry didn't even care if he let snot drip all over his shirt. *"And Lily—"* Harry felt his own breath still. *"She was screaming and crying. She was hugging something but I couldn't see it — not at first — because the snakes were trying to eat it. She kept screaming for help. She saw me and she got so angry, so, so very angry. She said I failed; that I was useless, and that I betrayed her. She said she hates me."*

Harry shushed Snape, not in any attempt to stop him, but to calm down. Snape was shaking and Harry could feel hot tears soaking through his shirt.

"The snakes were writhing all over the thing Lily had just held, but then I could see just a peek from within their scales, and it was—" Harry felt Snape's arm wound up around his waist and Snape's fingers grasping the hem of his shirt, winding it up tight. *"Your eyes were just like hers — except they were dead. Dull. Empty. Vacant. Your skin was so pale and covered in blood. And the snakes kept biting you; one chewed off a piece of your lip as another slithered down your throat — all the while your dead eyes were staring right through me."*

Harry felt his blood run cold, so he held Snape closer, tighter, pressing him against his chest until he could feel Snape's breath.

"And then you woke me up."

Harry let himself exhale. "What a horrible dream," he whispered.

For once, Kreacher had the decency to walk into a room instead of Apparating. Harry took the glasses of warm milk and handed one to Snape. Kreacher had mixed honey into them, and the taste was soothing.

"Please don't ever think of it as anything else but a nightmare. You are alive now. You might not be well, but you are getting there. I'm alive, too, and I'm so grateful for everything you've done for me. And my mother, too. She never hated you, not even after everything. I saw her ghost, and she only ever looked kind and proud. If she could see you now, she would probably hug you. And Albus never blamed you; he forced your hand. Don't carry any of that guilt anymore. Let it go. The war is over. You won." The last of it was what Harry had been repeating to himself for months now. Sometimes it helped. It was truly horrible how the war could sneak up on you so suddenly. The weight of it was crushing.

Snape didn't say anything but he sighed deeply, burying his face deeper into Harry's collar.

It was quiet for a long while between them. For a moment, Harry thought Snape fell back to sleep, but then the quill started writing again.

"I thought I deserved to be in Azkaban." Harry shook his head sternly but did not interrupt. *"I killed him. And I did horrible things. I was young, and I thought—"* Snape wiped his eyes. *"I thought we could bring change. I thought we were doing something great. It was really fucked up, but, at first, I thought we had to be radical to achieve anything. If politics don't work, then—"* Snape cut himself short, changing the subject. *"But it kept getting worse. And then Lily—"* He swallowed

heavily. *"It was too much. I begged Albus for help. And look how I paid him back. Everyone I have ever loved is gone. I'm a murderer and a Death Eater. I deserved to be there. Not that anyone even missed me; just this one brat who makes no sense."*

"It was never your fault," Harry whispered, but Snape kept going, finally picking up wind.

"I was so angry all the time. Why were you even there? I wanted you to go away. I wanted to yell at you and make sure you never came back, but you did come back every single week. What were you even trying to do? There is nothing for me out there. No job, no home, nothing." The quill was writing so furiously it scratched a hole in the paper. *"I served my purpose. Why didn't you just leave me there to die?"* The quill slowed to a halt and fell down lifelessly.

"I couldn't leave you," Harry swore. He held Snape closer and almost hissed, "None of that's true. You have so many people who care, just as I said yesterday, and I can repeat that to you for as long as it takes for you to believe it. It wasn't just me who got you out. It was Kingsley and Minerva, Narcissa and Draco, and Hermione, too. Even Ron helped out in his own way. So, you have all of us behind you — and me especially — so you better get used to it. And you haven't 'served your purpose' — there's a job and a home for you out there, you just haven't found them yet." Harry huffed, and had to consciously loosen his hold on Snape's shoulders since he had been holding him too tight in an effort to drive the point home.

The silence stretched, and Snape lowered his empty glass.

The quill rose one final time. *"Thank you, Harry."*

"Any time. However often you need to hear it." Harry put aside both their milk glasses and handed Snape another much needed Pepperup. Hopefully he wouldn't have another fever-induced nightmare.

Snape drank the vial without complaints, and Harry helped him back under the covers.

"Go back to sleep, Severus. I'll stay here until you nod off." Harry brushed the hair off Severus's forehead. It was less clammy now, the fever seemed to have eased during their talk.

Severus nodded and turned on his side. He fell asleep with Harry's thumb rubbing circles on his shoulder.

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The first week passed by almost normally.

Harry prepared Severus easy-to-swallow meals and kept him company while he ate. Harry made sure Severus had books to read or a radio to listen to in his room. Harry had even taken his plant into Severus's room, so it would liven the place up some. Harry took care of Severus's flu, and Severus was content to lie in bed for the three days it took for his fever to be gone. But after that, it was a struggle to convince Snape to keep resting until he had his strength back.

Draco had sent Severus's potions a couple of days after Harry had initially asked for them. Apparently, a mere sip was enough for Severus to get all sorts of ideas of grandeur. He still didn't have much energy to do anything, but when the mood struck him, he was almost impossible to dissuade.

This was also when Harry found out that Severus had a habit of wandering around the house during the night. The first night Harry had woken up to Snape's shuffling. When he went to investigate, Severus had been right behind his door on his way to the bathroom. Harry had startled himself so

badly that the scream nearly knocked Severus off his feet.

They had both apologized, and thankfully hadn't had a repeat performance. It was getting easier to explain all the odd sounds as Severus's presence in the house.

Severus seemed to be everywhere, unable to sit still. It was almost as if he needed something to do to feel useful.

Harry was just glad he hadn't mentioned finally finishing with the basement. There wasn't any furniture in there — he had left that for later — but he had evened out the floors and fortified the walls.

Right now, Harry was fixing up the kitchen. Severus had made a hobby of sitting close by so that he could criticize Harry's every move. Since Severus wasn't allowed to help and sitting still was, technically, resting, Harry had decided to put up with it. At least it kept Severus from wandering around the house trying to find anything to amuse himself with.

He was under the sink — taking care of the pipes — when the corner of Severus' notebook jabbed Harry's temple.

"There are spells for that. Your blundering is only going to cause us water damage. Besides, I'm hungry."

Harry sneezed as the quill tickled his nose as it danced swiftly across the paper.

"I don't know the spell." Harry hit his head on the counter on the way out and rubbed the aching spot.

"It's not difficult. Did you even research before you started?" read the notebook, sailing by almost teasingly.

Harry glared at Severus. "Of course I did. I got a DIY book."

Severus snorted. It was an ugly sound, but recognizable. Harry was getting used to Severus's limited range of sounds. He could do grunts, groans, moans, and other primitive noises, but he didn't have much control over them. The less vocal parts the gesture had, the better Severus was at it. Scoffs, hisses, and clicks were Severus's specialty, something he almost reveled.

"You should get the Handyman's Handbook. It actually has useful spells in it. Unlike the other hacks, the author knows how to fix things permanently, instead of just prettying them up. It was written by a professional."

Harry lifted his brows. This was the first time Severus actually had offered concrete advice instead of pure criticism.

"Have you read it? Do you fix things often? Hey — you could help and teach me some of those spells! You are very good at giving instructions."

"Considering your blundering at Potions, I doubt that."

Harry scoffed. "Hey! I had your old Potions book in sixth year, remember, and I did exceptionally well. Now, do you have experience with this or not?" Harry pulled out a chair and joined Severus at the table. The chair creaked, and Harry reminded himself to buy new furniture once the renovations were over. He didn't want anything brand-new getting scuffed.

Severus rubbed his chin before relenting. *"I renovated Spinner's End once I inherited it. It has since fallen into disrepair, I'm afraid."*

"Really? All on your own? That's really cool. I could use the help!" Harry enthused. He was certain Severus would know a lot of neat spells which would ease Harry's way with this project. "What do you want to eat? You can tell me about the house while I cook, then you can teach me some home renovation spells."

"Why do you want to know about my house?" The notebook followed Harry everywhere, which was sometimes inconvenient. It was especially so when Severus slid sheets of paper under the toilet door to continue ranting, even when Harry specifically locked the door to get away from him for a moment. But it was useful while Harry walked around the room, gathering up ingredients.

"I don't know. You lived there for a long time and it sounds like it's important to you. We can talk about something else too, I guess. Is mashed potatoes with gravy fine?" Harry was already picking up potatoes.

"It's fine," Severus confirmed, his eyes never leaving Harry. That was another new development. Severus was always observing Harry. Harry was aware of it, but he didn't have a reason to bring it up. Even when they weren't talking, Severus would always be looking at him, as if he was a puzzle Snape just couldn't solve. *"How can you be a decent cook, but can't brew one potion without taking half the lab with you?"*

"Oh, come on," Harry groaned. He wasn't that bad in Potions. He got an E, yet still Severus would never let him live that down. "Cooking's easy. I've been doing it since I was old enough to reach the stove. It doesn't need any magic, and you get to eat whatever you make. Besides, Molly's been teaching me. She actually likes showing people how to cook, but most of the Weasleys are too impatient to concentrate when they could be eating instead." Harry started peeling potatoes.

"Besides, Potions doesn't make any sense. At least in cooking, if you add salt, it gets saltier; you add spice, you get more flavor; add milk, it's creamier; and if you add starch it's less runny. It all makes sense. In Potions, you add something, and suddenly your potion is exploding. Or, add one drop too much and suddenly the potion turns into the opposite of what it was supposed to be. Just, what?" Harry added the potatoes to a pot of water and set it on the stove to boil.

"It's a precise skill to brew good potions."

Harry grimaced. "Sure. All the respect for people who have mastered it. I yield to your talent. So, how long have you had Spinner's End?"

"I inherited it on my late twenties," Severus admitted.

Harry started preparing the gravy. "Your parents died young, then?"

He startled as Severus hit the table. He hadn't got used to Severus's physical responses, which replaced his lack of intonation and speech.

"They were not the healthiest people." Harry glanced at Severus and was relieved to find out the he wasn't mad, but annoyed. Snape changed the subject. *"Back then I was proud to get it. I was young and stupid. It was a house. I was quite excited to remodel it and make it my own. I didn't care how I got it, I was just happy to have actual property in my name."*

"What's the problem with that?" Harry couldn't understand that. He'd been happy to inherit, and he knew Ron and Hermione would be over the moon, considering that they couldn't afford to buy one at the moment.

"Inheritance tax rate is 40% for anything above the threshold. However, I was lucky the property wasn't anywhere near that expensive. What I forgot was that my parents were poor and hadn't even finished paying their mortgage. I inherited negative money. I should have let it all go. Instead, all I saw was a house with my name on it. I was an imbecile. I regret ever taking the place. I could have lived in Hogwarts."

"Wait, what about this house? I didn't pay any taxes." Harry didn't even have any idea what the property was worth.

"Idiot child. What would I give to have your problems. A house with several floors — four, if you haven't figured out yet — multiple bedrooms, a separate kitchen, living room, and dining room, for fuck's sake. Located in London. You could get a fortune for the land it stands on alone — just that is four times more valuable than my shack. Everything above the inheritance threshold you have to pay back 40% in taxes! You had to pay to keep this house." Severus hit the table with each sentence, driving the point home like a hammer hitting nails.

Harry's eyes bugged out. "What?" he whispered. He had never even thought about any of that.

"They don't teach this at Hogwarts, do they? I wish they did. I wouldn't have touched that house with a ten-foot pole if I had known."

Harry sputtered, "But who paid my taxes, then?"

"Harry, as an orphan with only muggle family, and as Hogwarts' ward for eighty percent of the year, you likely had it taken care of by Albus. Knowing his machinations, he probably had it all figured out with Black. With your inheritance from your parents, I think you're fine." Severus spat, making a weird hissing sound.

"He could have told me." Harry frowned. He had never thought of himself as rich, but to hear that he owned valuable property without even knowing it... Well, it did kind of irk him. What if the Weasleys thought poorly of him? No, they would have said something. "I don't want to talk about taxes anymore. So, you inherited the house and the mortgage. You renovated it yourself?"

"Yes. I wanted to make it into a home. A proper home, not just a house I lived in. I managed to do all the basic renovations, but over the years it started to fall to ruin. I didn't stay on the property that often. When I did, I didn't feel like fixing it. Paying the mortgage took a significant slice of my paycheck every month, so I didn't enjoy seeing how much of an inconvenience it ended up being. I couldn't sell it, though, because it still had memories of my mother in it. Besides, maybe after a few more years — maybe a decade, at the most — I should have paid off mortgage. It was still my home, Hogwarts or not. Maybe one day I could leave it to someone. Not that I had anyone to leave it to." Severus sighed loudly.

"Wow — erm. That was sadder than I thought it would be." Harry blinked several times. "So, what will you do now? Do you still want to keep the house? Even if you do, you could stay here for free and work on paying everything off, if you wanted." Harry felt like a child trying to wear his father's shoes ten sizes too big for him. He finished the gravy and started mashing the potatoes.

"We'll see. At least I can show you some useful renovation spells. You have this house now, so you better not let it go to waste."

"Yes sir!" Harry said. He began loading the table with mashed potatoes, gravy, and bread. He got glasses, plates, and utensils from the cupboards, and placed them right in front of Severus.

Severus laid a hand on Harry's arm. Harry felt his cheeks warm and his neck prickle. This was

another new thing between them, another that Harry had not yet grown used to. Severus was more hands on nowadays, since he couldn't thank Harry vocally.

"You're welcome. Enjoy your food," Harry mumbled, his skin still tingling from where Severus had touched him. Severus's hands were so warm, and the heat always lingered even after he had already let him go.

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Fixing up Grimmauld Place had become their thing. Severus still wasn't able to help. He tried once, only to find out that his magic hadn't recovered enough and the wallpaper he tried to hang ended up peeling off. It was more of a blow to Severus's pride than Harry had expected. He was defensive and snappy, but soon drove into the one task he could do. Severus became the conductor of the whole operation: directing Harry, giving him advice, and just down right bossing him around. While it was somewhat taxing to constantly work to someone else's instructions, Harry had to admit that Severus had a better sense of style than both Kreacher and he combined.

It was surprising to see that Severus — who chose to only wear black and leaned towards secondhand furniture if given the choice — could make pretty decent color palettes for each room. They were elegant, yet restrained; earthy, but not boring. He also knew how to match furniture, something Harry had very little interest in. Harry always got what he liked the best and ended up with a slightly chaotic setting. Severus could find comfortable and practical furniture without turning the house into a mismatch of different styles. They hadn't yet bought any of said furniture, but Severus had listed everything from the catalog, and even drawn Harry a picture of how he wanted everything to be placed.

Severus relished his role of a harsh taskmaster, which Harry suspected had something to do with the budget. Harry had given Severus free rein to choose any material and furniture he wanted and — as long as it looked good without being ridiculously expensive — Harry agreed to get everything Severus said. At first Severus had tested him with a list of absurd equipment. Harry had lifted his eyebrows in surprise before accepting it with a defeated nod. Severus had torn the paper out of Harry's hands, before writing a new, much more reasonably priced list to give to Harry.

Whatever test Harry had passed that day, it had done wonders for Severus's self-confidence. Severus knew quality, but above all he appreciated value. Best materials for cheapest price considering their properties. He clearly had some kind of vision he wanted to achieve but couldn't have implemented at Spinner's End. No matter how much Severus tried to remain nonchalant, Harry could tell he was just as excited as Harry was, if not more, about this project.

"Wait, wait! I can't read that fast!" Harry wobbled a little on his ladder as he tried to finish attaching the wooden panels to 'the accent wall', as Severus had put it. The notebook was flying around his head like an annoying fly he couldn't shake off. It was impossible to work and read both at the same time.

"The living room should be simple, tasteful, but comfortable. Now that the walls are painted, the accent wall of dark paneling should bring out some character." No, he had read that already.

"The windows in here are large enough that the frames need to match the paint on the walls. The rooms with smaller windows, on the other hand..." Harry remembered this. They had argued for ages about the paint in the dining room.

"We are going to need new doors. Maybe sliding doors, because the huge, creaking double doors we have now take too much space."

"Severus, I haven't even finished the walls yet! The fourth floor needs completely new plywood before I can even start putting up wallpaper! Let's work on one thing at a time. First the structural renovations, then the floors, then the walls, and lastly all the loose ends like doors and furniture," Harry whined, almost falling off his ladder as he tried to twist to look at Severus. He caught himself immediately and went back to magicking nails onto the panels to make it seem intentional.

"I thought we were working one room at a time?" Severus wrote. Harry heard the flimsy chair Severus sat on creaking as he shifted impatiently.

"I thought so too, at first, but I changed my mind. I need completely different tools for each section of renovations. Plus, it's easier to do one task at a time to all the rooms, get a routine going, and then move onto the next step." Harry didn't want to sound whiny, but he had been at this for hours now, and he needed a break. He was also too stubborn to stop when the accent wall was this close to being finished, so he soldiered on.

"If we start repairing structure damage to all the rooms at once, there won't be anywhere safe to stay in while the whole house is taken apart." It was a legitimate argument but it rankled Harry how easily Severus won every debate they had.

"The bedrooms are done. We can finish the living room, and kitchen, but after that I'm doing it the other way. It's not like we even use the other rooms." Harry argued almost just for the sake of arguing at this point.

"The second-floor toilet and dining room too," Severus added, and Harry rolled his eyes. *"We need at least one working toilet, and it's good to have the dining room available if we have guests."*

"What guests?" Harry grouched. As if either of them was planning on hosting anytime soon.

"The Weasleys could come by any time, and I would prefer them in one room so it's easier to avoid them. Only the dining room and drawing room can fit all of them at once." Harry swatted at the notebook as it tried to push itself under his nose, nearly causing him to step back and fall.

"Fuck's sake," Harry cursed as he once again held to the ladder for dear life. He turned to glare at Severus, who responded with an exaggerated shrug. It wasn't as if Severus actually controlled the notebook, it just chose to pester Harry based on his intentions.

"You should really drop that anonymity with the Weasleys. They're not all that bad, and since you are living here you're going to be spending a lot of time around them. There's no avoiding that." Harry waved his wand and summoned another panel. He struggled to hold it still long enough to get the first nail in place, and was surprised when Severus stood up to steady it for him. It was kind. Harry took no time to drive the nails in place.

"We'll just have to see about that."

Harry squinted at the scrawl and scoffed. "Hold up the last panel. I'm taking a break."

The accent wall was finished at last. Harry jumped down onto the freshly laid wood floor.

Looking back at how well the walls and floor matched, how clean and fresh the whole room looked, really made Harry feel accomplished.

The whole house had a completely new look to it. The rooms were brighter, and the mix of light and color made everything appear more spacious than it actually was. Definitely more welcoming, at the very least. Severus had insisted they replace the fireplaces, too, and Harry had to agree with his reasoning; everything fit now. Even without furniture, this drawing room looked as though it

could actually be used to host visitors. It invited people to stay.

Harry really liked how the whole room felt; it inspired him to make it into something he wanted to spend time in. He couldn't wait to furnish it and maybe get a few more houseplants.

Severus had somehow managed to not only keep it simple but also make it fit both Harry and himself. It was cozy and used neutral colors. No colors with house affiliation, but instead dark blue accent walls with white main walls matched with pale hardwood floors. Severus knew a spell that automatically laid the wooden floor in place, so all Harry had to do was attach them, then use another spell to apply the varnish.

It astounded him how much magic could ease the process of renovating. Sometimes he thought it took longer to wait for the materials than it took to actually install them. Severus knew how everything was done, so all Harry had to do was follow his instructions. Together, they made the house beautiful.

The renovations were expensive, but seeing his hard work paying off was worth it. He could see himself living here for decades to come. Sirius would have been proud. He had always hated the house — if only he could see it now.

Harry felt himself almost tear up but he gathered himself in time.

Severus and he were building a home out of this broken house, and he loved it.

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The second week arrived with a sulking Severus. He hadn't joined Harry for meals, or even come downstairs at all that day, but had instead locked himself in his room. Sometimes Harry could hear loud sounds from within, but mostly it was dead quiet.

The entire house was eerily silent now that Harry had got used to Severus's presence. They usually shared meals and talked about something or other, then took a few hours to renovate the house. But today that hadn't happened.

Harry had waited for Severus to join him. When it became clear that Severus wouldn't be appearing anytime soon, he tried to start renovating the dining room himself but couldn't get himself motivated.

When it was already evening with neither hide nor hair of Severus in sight, Harry chose to carry Severus' meal to him.

Harry knocked on Severus' door and nearly dropped all his offerings when something loud hit the door back. He leaped backwards and stared thunderstruck at the sheet of paper that slipped from under the door.

"Go away!" was spelled in huge letters, making it perfectly clear Severus wanted no company.

Apparently Severus was having a bad day. Harry felt tempted to ask him to talk about it, as he would with his friends, but he also knew that Severus was nothing like Ron or Hermione. He wouldn't appreciate any prying, as he would interpret it.

If Severus wanted to sulk, then he would. All Harry could do was leave him to it and hope he came down on his own.

"I made creamy pasta with ham and cheese. I'll leave it by the door under a preservation charm. I

wanted to ask if you would like to set up the lab with me, but we can do that tomorrow." Harry laid the tray down with a soft clatter of dishes and left to wait it out in the newly renovated drawing room.

Not even the room's calming presence could ease Harry's mind. He lit the fire and sat on the new sofa. They hadn't bought much furniture yet, other than a sofa group and a coffee table.

Harry twiddled with his wand without anything better to do. This was the first time Severus had got himself so worked up, and Harry had got so used to his company that he had a hard time remembering what he used to do when he was all by his lonesome.

Usually he would visit Ron and Hermione, or he would busy himself with some project. Maybe he could weed the garden? It was awfully late for gardening, though. Harry ran his hand through his hair and wondered if his days had truly been so empty before that he didn't know what to do with himself now that Severus wasn't available.

He busied himself with whatever he could think of: making the next shopping list, writing letters to Ron and Hermione, contemplating for the tenth time if he should get a pet.

When an hour later he heard steps by the entry, he turned his head around and smiled excitedly at Severus. Severus looked grouchy but also sheepish. Even though the quill was writing, Harry didn't need to see the note to understand. He could read it from Severus's lips: *"Well? Are you coming?"*

Harry was up on his feet in a second. He was so, so glad Severus had taken him up on his offer after all. He had left it as an inducement, but he hadn't dared to hope it would actually work.

"Did you bring the chest with all your things? I have already done all the renovations. I had to clear it of growth and make sure it's not too humid, but it's all done now. The floors and walls were really crooked, but I found a spell to fix that. I also used some expansion charms to make it roomier. I didn't add any charmed windows, because I wasn't sure if you would like them." Harry explained as he led the way to the new lab. It was connected to the kitchen and it used to be the size of a pantry, but it was more spacious now. Harry had also added paths on the floor so that if Severus spilled anything, or had an accident, most of it would drain into a septic tank, which Severus would have to sort out himself later. It wasn't safe letting potions drain into the sewer, but Harry didn't want to flood the room.

"The door is charmed to withstand any possible accidents, and to cancel sound, unless someone touches the door. I put it up there so you can have some privacy. Then I also noticed that you couldn't really stop me if I tried to enter at a really inopportune moment, so I added a light right here that lets me know to not disturb you. It works both ways, so you will know if I need you for something." Harry pointed at the light he added on top of the door. He wasn't used to waiting outside unless someone specifically told him not to enter. It had caused them more than one accident when Severus wasn't able to write a note fast enough. It wasn't as though he could just tell him to stay away.

Severus didn't make sounds often. From what Harry understood, Severus' vocal cords were really stiff and wouldn't produce sound unless he put a lot of effort into it. With a lot of effort came a lot of volume, and, once he got going, it was near impossible to change noises. Either he made one loud sound or another, or nothing at all. There was no in between. He also couldn't maintain any note for too long or his voice would break. It was almost like having an extremely sore throat, where you couldn't make more than a whisper. It wasn't ideal for putting overeager Gryffindors in their place.

Severus hated having anyone know about his difficulties, especially Harry, but Harry had managed

to piece it together. It was new to him to try and be considerate about Severus's difficulties. Especially when he had to navigate that fine line between being aware and not making Severus realize it. Most often Severus would snap if he thought Harry was looking down on him. Harry wasn't, but Severus took offense when someone showed consideration for him. Severus hated being valued less than anyone else with a passion.

Harry immediately started babbling to distract himself, and Severus, from any thoughts about inferiority. "I added a furnace in one corner for when you need to work on a huge batch — as you can see — and those cupboards on the left have stone tops for all your ingredient preparation. On the right, I put wall-to-wall bookshelves. They're submerged so they don't take up space. I had to use the furniture I found lying unused in the house, but I hope they will work. Oh, and there's an ingredients store on the wall next to the worktables. It's Wizard Space." Harry gestured wildly around, knowing Severus could see it just fine without any kind of a tour.

"So yeah. Surprise, I guess." Harry finished by slapping his hands on his upper thighs. He had been working on this for two weeks, constantly adding to it, and keeping it a secret from Severus had been a real bitch. Whenever Severus had to lie down to rest, Harry was immediately down here to work.

Severus looked around, blinking several times, as if to prove to himself he wasn't seeing things. His shoulders sagged as if some invisible tension had been drained from his shoulders. He looked absolutely moved, which made all of this work worth it for Harry.

Severus whispered something inaudible, before shaking himself and sending his notebook over.

"You did this?"

"Kreacher helped. The counters belonged to Arcturus. We also had a catalog, which we ordered from one of those potions publications you have. Sorry that we didn't ask to borrow it." The room wasn't nearly as good as those in the catalog, but Harry had tried to copy one of the photos, which showed a professional-looking lab full of equipment. He had needed to ask Hermione for help with all the extension charms, and how to create the Wizard Space for the store. She had also helped research all the charms and wards necessary to fortify the room, while Kreacher had done the furnace.

"Why?" Severus looked wary, as if he was waiting for the other shoe to drop, which Harry thought was ridiculous.

"You're a Potions Master and you live here. I said I would get you a lab." It went without saying for Harry. Severus needed this for work. It was important to him. Harry knew Severus' passion for Potions and that he needed to have a good workstation. If not one as good as Hogwarts, then at least one close to it. It would help him settle down and relax. Harry had learned that Severus used potion making as a way to relax and collect himself, just as much as he used it to challenge himself. Having a stock of potions wasn't just something he enjoyed, it was also his security blanket. An escape, almost.

"I know you said that. I was expecting you to provide me with a room to use, not—" Severus looked around the wide-open space that was all free for him to do whatever he wished with. He opened his hands and gestured to everything. *"This. It's more than I expected. Especially considering that it's only for the time I live here."*

Harry didn't like the idea of Severus only being here temporarily. He couldn't quite pinpoint why, but he had grown used to having him here. He chose to ignore that feeling for now. "It's just what you deserve. Stay as long as you want, and even if you choose to leave, you can always come visit.

The lab isn't going anywhere." Definitely not after all the time Harry spent building it.

Severus eyed Harry for a long while as if measuring him up. Harry felt oddly like an ingredient that barely scraped by the Potions Master's rigorous standards.

Severus finally seemed to come to a decision and walked closer. His presence was still intimidating, and it took everything in Harry not to fidget. He reached for Harry's hand, and once more Harry felt each hair on his body stand on attention. Severus's thumb brushed his inner wrist, and Harry had to suppress the shivers.

"Thank you." Severus mouthed without using the notebook. His black eyes were staring straight into Harry, who had to fight down a blush. Any kind of approval from Severus was always special, though Harry never quite understood how much he valued it.

Harry choked. "No problem." His tongue felt like lead, and he rubbed his wrist when Severus let him go. Severus's hands were so warm, and the cold air made Harry miss it.

He hadn't realized he had been looking at his wrist until the notebook started nudging his head.

"Now help me unpack my lab. And by help, I mean that you do it. After all, I'm not allowed to do magic." Harry immediately turned to Severus, who looked smug as he cracked open the chest. It was absolutely brimming with his lab equipment. *"Wasn't it you who insisted that I take it easy? Well, chop chop. I'll show you where it all needs to go."*

Harry made a low whine at the back of his throat, but immediately stamped it down. Severus was right, and Harry had brought him down here to set up the lab. He just wished he had McGonagall's talent with packing and unpacking stuff.

"Yes, sir," Harry grouched, but tackled the task with determination.

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"Finally, it's done!" Harry gasped as he clambered out of the laboratory. He had been moving back and forth for hours trying to get everything just right, and his feet were killing him.

"I'm going to crash on the sofa, watch the fire, and have some hot chocolate. Will you join me?" Harry didn't turn to look over his shoulder where Severus was following him. There was no answer that would interrupt Harry's plans. He called for Kreacher to get them drinks and snacks.

"Do we have any whiskey?" was scrawled on the notebook.

Harry pinched his face thoughtfully. "I actually don't know. We might, but I haven't bought any. There is a chance someone left some over here." Mundungus always had alcohol with him, and he was pretty sure Sirius had had a stash.

"I will ask Kreacher," Severus informed him, and went to talk to the house-elf. Meanwhile Harry got himself comfortable on the sofa, moaning in bliss when he put his feet up. He used his wand to tend the fire, letting the heat soothe his aching muscles.

Severus returned with a bottle of old vintage whiskey and a small green bottle which Harry hadn't seen before.

Severus sent the notebook sailing towards Harry. He made himself comfortable in an armchair, angling it so that he could both look at Harry and warm himself by the fire.

"Would you like to have a drink with me?" Harry had to squint to read it as the only light came from the fire.

"I don't know. I'm not sure if I like whiskey. I tried Firewhisky once and it was strong, but okay." Harry liked the feeling he got when he drank it. It was like liquid courage, but he wasn't sure if he liked the drink itself. He hadn't tried much alcohol at all, but the little he had had always tasted very strong. Not like something you would drink for the taste.

Severus looked as if he was laughing but the sound he made was closer to hissing. He moved his lips to talk and waved the green bottle. Harry yanked at the notebook to read: *"I could guess as much. A brat like you, barely an adult, would lean towards sweeter liquors or beer. That's why I got you this."*

"What's that?" Harry asked, trying to read the label. "Mint liqueur. Forty percent. That's too strong!" Harry yelled, and Severus snorted a laugh. It wasn't an attractive sound.

"You don't drink it straight from the bottle, idiot." Harry managed to catch Severus's eye roll before he read the note.

Kreacher popped in then, with a plate full of sandwiches and a cup of hot chocolate for Harry. The sandwiches were cut small, and there was no crust, probably for Severus's benefit.

Harry reached for his cup, but Severus laid his hand on Harry's palm. Harry sought around himself to read the note. *"Trust me?"*

"Yeah, of course." Harry had trusted Severus with his life. He could trust Severus now to not give him alcohol poisoning.

Severus added a good splash of the liqueur into Harry's cup, before mixing it in with the spoon. He handed the cup to Harry and nodded encouragingly.

Harry raised his brow at Severus almost playfully before taking a sip.

"Mm!" Harry mulled it on his tongue before swallowing. He could only taste a bit of the alcohol — the hot chocolate had made it sweet. The flavor of mint went well with the hot chocolate. It tasted almost like Christmas, and it warmed him right up. Harry had to limit himself to sipping it, instead of chugging the whole cup in one go. "It's really good!"

Severus toasted Harry with his glass of whiskey before throwing it back. He breathed through his teeth, making a content face. It was the first time Harry saw Severus look happy in his presence.

Harry smiled to himself and turned to the fire. This was nice. Just sitting by the fire with drinks and talking.

"I'm glad we finished the lab. I like this." He took another sip of his drink, savoring it.

Severus nodded, and patted his chest. A nonverbal 'me too'.

"We should do this more often. Maybe play a game sometimes. I'm poor at chess, but maybe cards." Severus did not comment, but that in itself was half an agreement.

They enjoyed the silence for a while, both warming themselves up by the fire.

"I'm glad you like your new lab. I put a lot of work into it, and I want you to feel at home." Harry admitted, emboldened by his drink.

Severus was observing him but didn't say anything. He still looked content, so Harry took that as an agreement. He was starting to appreciate the silent conversation and how he could read Severus with a glance. He didn't need verbal cues to know if Severus was mad anymore. If Severus was silent and didn't correct him, he was in agreement. If he was actually angry, you would know. God, would you know.

Harry sunk deeper onto the sofa and sighed. He rested his eyes for only a moment until he felt the notebook gently nudging his temple. He peered at it and read Severus' note.

"Have you thought about what you want to do now? You talked about that on one of your visits." Harry glanced at Severus with surprise. He had listened! Severus had never before referred to any of Harry's long-winded monologues back at Azkaban. It warmed him to know Severus still remembered.

"I'm not quite sure. Everything I mentioned sounds interesting, but I haven't been able to choose which one I'd like best," Harry admitted, resting his head on the armrest so that he could lie down and still see Severus comfortably.

Harry held the notebook higher when he noticed the quill start writing again.

"You can always build things, if nothing else. These renovations are proceeding surprisingly well."

"Thanks! I'll remember that." Harry wondered if it was the alcohol which made his stomach feel so warm. "I like making people happy. And I liked building that lab for you. I kept thinking of how you could start brewing again, and how calm you used to look when you made potions before. It made me try harder than I originally intended. I had the basics done a week ago and I already considered it finished, but then I went back to it again and made it better. I'm glad I did." Harry wasn't really explaining himself well. Usually he didn't have the patience to research things before doing them. But this time he had happily asked for help, and read through books, and even researched the essentials a good potions lab needed in the first place. It felt as if he had created something completely new all of his own accord, and he found pride in that.

Harry closed his eyes again, but he laughed a moment later when the quill deliberately tickled his nose. Harry rubbed the spot as he glared playfully at Severus.

The quill danced back to the notebook: *"You shouldn't fall asleep here. Go to bed if you are tired."*

"I'm not tired! I want to stay up with you and talk some more," Harry insisted, and picked up a pillow to prop himself up more. Sitting up more might keep him better alert. "Talk to me, Severus." He pulled the notebook closer to easily balance it on his chest.

"About what?"

Harry snorted. "I've been talking enough for the both of us for the past however many months. Literally anything will do." He waved his arm casually, and glanced at Severus, who lifted his eyebrow in a challenge.

"Oh, so now you want to pay attention to me. All it took was a near-death experience and a stay in prison." Harry laughed. He hadn't known Severus did jokes.

"Don't be like that. I'm tired and comfortable. You could probably start reciting the Potions textbook, and I would get two pages in before I realize you are having me on." Harry grinned, and put a hand behind his head, using the other one to hold the notebook.

"Table of Contents: Introduction; Chapter One, An Introduction to Alchemy—"

Harry knocked the notebook over on his chest and whined. "No, not Advanced Potion Making."

"Congratulations Potter, you figured it out before page two. Now what?" Harry glanced at Severus and shrugged.

"It's Harry now. And anything. What do you want to do now that you're out? Oh, what's the first thing you wanted to do when you got out? Food? Fresh air? A bath? We can do literally anything now, so if there was something on your list that you didn't get to do, we should do that tomorrow," Harry enthused, and turned back to the notebook.

Severus considered it for a while, since the quill did not immediately start writing. *"I don't know. I did not think about it that much, to be honest. I didn't have much faith in actually getting released,"* Severus explained as he refilled his glass of whiskey. *"Sometimes I used to think about what I would like to do if I could quit my job at Hogwarts, ignore the war, and go."* Severus stopped speaking. Harry leaned closer, curious to know what Snape had been about to say.

"What?" he asked, shifting onto his side. He propped the notebook on the coffee table so he could still see it while he kept his eyes on Severus as he spoke, his lips moving without making a sound, but the quill recording his words anyhow.

"I thought I would first go to my house and pack everything up. Then I would sell it, just like that. I would visit your mother's grave, and then I would get myself plane tickets to Berlin," Severus explained as he circled the whiskey in his glass.

"Why Germany? And why plane tickets? A Portkey's faster, and I don't see you as the kind to sit next to strangers on a tight plane," Harry wondered, immediately straying off the point.

"Wizards don't track muggle traffic as meticulously as they track magical transportation, idiot. Now listen while I explain. They have conventions in Germany, and some of the best potion makers come from their country. The laws about experimental potions are freer there, and the ingredients more available. It's the ideal place to live for a Potions Master. I wanted to experiment and create new potions. I had mostly been improving old recipes lately, especially since Hogwarts took up so much of my brewing time," Severus explained, hands moving subtly with his speech to gesture his points.

"That makes sense." Harry nodded and scratched his temple. "We could go sometime. I can't stay, since all my friends are here, but we could make a holiday of it."

"What would you do in Germany?" Severus sneered, but Harry didn't take it to heart. *"The reason why I never left in the first place is because I couldn't afford to have a holiday. If I want to earn my house back, I need to get back to brewing as soon as possible."*

"I don't know what I would do in Germany! Wear Lederhosen and eat bratwurst, I guess. I've never been anywhere! I can count all the places I have ever been on my fingers. It would be nice to see what else is out there," Harry argued with a playful grin, glad to see Severus found it just as ridiculous as he did.

"Lederhosen und Zaubertränke, what a nice couple we make."

Harry couldn't help but snort a laugh. "I don't even know what that means. Or how to spell it." He tried to control himself but found it difficult. Severus could probably do well in Germany. He could probably talk the language, or at least read it a little, and he could brew, and make a home for himself in the country where even the houses are built from stone. It would fit him. It was hard to think how Harry would work there with him. Harry, with his nonexistent understanding of life

outside of England, and where the only things he knew of German were the trousers he had seen in a cartoon. He didn't want to think about Severus leaving for someplace so far away. Harry couldn't follow him there, since all his friends were here, and he didn't even know if Severus would allow any visitors. Harry didn't even know why he wanted to go with Severus so much.

"You don't have to leave anytime soon. You can work from here and sort out all your things. We can go on a holiday together. I'll pay for the flights, and you can navigate and translate, because I have no idea what's out there," Harry explained, hoping that Severus didn't have any immediate plans.

"Idiot. I'm not going anywhere. But I will remember your offer of free flights." Severus sipped his whiskey. Harry called Kreacher and asked for another hot chocolate.

"So you want to start making new potions. We could make a small plot in the back garden with some of the more common ingredients." Harry was sure Severus could instruct him on the planting process.

"You are starting to sound awfully domestic, planning out gardens, et cetera." Severus pointed out with a smirk.

"Well it's our house now! We've gotta make it a home for both of us equally. Not just me. That would just be sad." Harry pouted, making Severus speechless. "Hey, Severus?" Harry asked, trying his best not to be lulled to sleep by his drink. "Why didn't you come down earlier today? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but I missed you." This second cup didn't have nearly as much liquor in it, but the little Harry had drunk made him more comfortable asking.

Harry almost dozed off before the quill started writing again.

"I was frustrated. Healing has been a slow process, even with the aid of potions. I feel a lot stronger already, but my magic is still weak. I tried some basic charms to redecorate my room more to my liking, but I barely had the strength to get half of it done. Usually it wouldn't take more than a couple of minutes. I feel useless resting every day when I should be working to pay my bills. I didn't even have any definite plans for income in place! With a lab, I can at least do owl orders if I advertise enough."

Harry nodded to the notebook, eyes drooping. "It will take some time to get your strength up, but it shouldn't be long anymore. Then you can brew all you want, and I know you'll have a lot of customers. You are the greatest brewer I know — and everyone else knows that too. Even if you only sold wolfsbane, you could make a lot of money."

Harry yawned loudly, and Severus stood up, almost startling him.

"Come on Harry, I'll take you up to bed."

Harry nodded, accepting Severus's outstretched hand to help him up. The soles of his feet were sore, so he waddled a little in his drowsiness, but Severus had a steadying hand on his shoulder blade.

"We can talk more tomorrow. At least one of us should be in good working order, don't you think." Harry protested as he read the note.

"You are just as capable as I am," Harry mumbled, as Severus held the door open for him so Harry could get into his room. "Good night Severus. See you tomorrow. And thanks for the drink."

"You are welcome. Good night."

Chapter Four

The next week brought new woes. Severus was recuperating well. He was finally getting some strength back, and the potions he was taking allowed him a bit more solid food. His magic wasn't yet a hundred percent, but it was getting there.

It was enough for him to insist he visit Gringotts. Harry had chosen to tag along and would be visiting Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes while Severus took care of his finances.

Ever since then the man had been in a foul mood. It wasn't helped by Severus going to the Ministry right after so he could apply for a trade name to sell his potions through the legal networks.

It was probably a blessing that they made it home before Severus started arguing.

That in itself was the most interesting experience Harry had had to live through yet. Severus paced back and forth the drawing room, gesturing wildly with his mouth in constant movement.

Harry was left sitting on the sofa holding the notebook in a death grip as he tried to read everything before the page turned over.

To summarize the topics: Severus was extremely stressed about the bills he had to pay, the money he had to make, and how he would be able to pull both off in a reasonable time frame.

Harry learned not to comment. He was swimming in dough and couldn't possibly understand the working class. Severus wasn't in the mood to be dissuaded.

Once Severus had blown off some steam, together they formed a battle plan. Severus still needed to recuperate, so he would keep his workload low, but he still insisted on getting back to brewing. Harry would keep renovating the house, making sure Severus ate and had enough time to relax.

And so they got started with their new routine. Harry would make them breakfast, and afterwards Severus would brew until Harry made them dinner. After, they would go for a walk so Severus could get some much-needed exercise, and then they would sit by the fire and talk. Severus would read while Harry would update him on the renovations.

The tension had been high for the past couple of days with Severus strung out with stress and Harry tiptoeing around him.

Harry tried to find a topic that would set them back to the easy mood of last week. "I would like your help renovating Teddy's bedroom. I feel a bit guilty that I haven't had time to visit him, but I can't just invite him here with the house as it is."

"*Who is Teddy?*" Severus wrote, and Harry was surprised that he hadn't mentioned him before. Shows what a great godfather he was being.

"He's Remus and Tonk's son. They named me godfather before their death. He's currently staying with Andromeda, but I would like him to visit sometimes."

"*Tonks was pregnant? Why was she fighting in her state!*" Severus gestured.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. But what matters is that Teddy's here, and I want to make sure he has a good family."

"Even more spoiled than you were?"

Harry scowled and kicked Severus' shin lightly. It showed how far they had come when Severus didn't immediately flay him.

"Yes," Harry said. "I want him to have a room and food and friends. I want him to know that there are people who care for him. I want him to have a childhood."

"As if you didn't." Severus scoffed, and Harry wanted to hit him for rolling his eyes.

"No, I didn't. If you need to use Legilimency on me to finally lay all those accusations to rest, then have at me." Harry raised his hands wide, showing he was ready. He was done having Severus spew vitriol at him thanks to his upbringing, and he wouldn't have it in his own house. If Severus wanted to fight, then they would fight.

"Do it!" Harry dared after no immediate attack came. He lowered his Occlumency barriers, though he was quite sure he didn't have any in the first place. He made himself wide open and was surprised when it didn't hurt when Severus finally chose to enter.

It didn't feel anything like it had before. Severus slipped in smoothly and slid over the memories. It didn't even seem as if he was trying to look, only seeing irrelevant memories about Ron and Hermione, and even one of Teddy being cradled by Andromeda. He skimmed the surface without upsetting any waters. It was up to Harry to dredge up his earliest, most painful memories, and it was Severus who pulled back first.

A note pushed into Harry's face. He wanted to rip it to shreds, but forced himself to read Severus's last form of defense before they came to blows.

"I do not wish to see it," Severus admitted, averting his eyes.

"Why not? You can have your revenge if it means that we can stop arguing about this," Harry growled.

"I don't want to fight you. I just wanted to see Teddy and know how you felt about him. I believe you about your muggles; I don't need to see it," Severus mouthed to his own shoulder.

"Why? If you believe me, then why do you always use it against me?" Harry sounded more desperate than he thought he was.

"It's a habit," Severus admitted, still not meeting Harry's eyes. *"I never liked you, but during the war I needed to truly hate you. It was easier to do that when I only saw James in you. I know you are not him, but I have been seeing him in you for years."*

"Why?" Harry begged, trying to understand.

"Because I was a spy! Anyone worth their salt knows legilimency. I couldn't have people knowing I treated you as anything less than how a Death Eater should treat their master's worst enemy. I knew nothing about you, not at first. I had no reason to hate you, so I had to make those reasons up." Severus gestured angrily, but then sagged. *"I have stayed with you for weeks now, and I know you are nothing like James. I know. You are more like your mother, if anything."*

Harry exhaled tension he didn't know he carried. "Can you tell me about her? I know so little about her. I have photos, but everyone always talks about Dad, and what James did, and how cool he and his friends were, and how many pranks they pulled."

Severus grinned weakly. *"Sounds like Black."*

"Yeah," Harry admitted. He had liked listening to Sirius talk about his father, but he also wanted to know about his mother. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to share. I don't need any of those things. I just want to know what she was good at. What her favorite class was. Did she have a favorite food or color? Just anything that makes her seem human. I know she existed, but —" Harry swallowed, ignoring the moisture in his eyes. "She sounds like a character from a history book. A kind, loving mother. That tells me nothing about what she was actually like when she was alive." Harry sniffed and wiped his face with his shirtsleeve.

Harry heard the pages of the notebook rustle and clutched it tightly when Severus wrote:

"Your mother was a stubborn, headstrong girl. She knew what she wanted, and when she set her mind to it, she could do anything. Nothing less would have kept James away from her for that long. She was also kind, as you have no doubt heard, but she was also the type of person to laugh a lot. She was similar to Granger with her bookishness, but not nearly as bad. She loved Charms and liked Potions well enough, but she hated Defense Against the Dark Arts. She was good at it, but she hated the thought of harming anyone, and our teacher back in the day was infamous for always dredging up examples of morality and how the world was just shades of gray where dark magic was just as useful and moral as light magic. She always wanted to believe there was good in everyone, and that dark magic was wrong. Clearly, she learned something from our professor to use blood magic to save you. She didn't like flying, either. She was decent at it, but she never got used to being so high up and going so fast. She almost flayed James alive when he pulled her on his broom without asking first, and then flying her around in circles and flips. Her favorite color was purple, and she hated pink because Tuney would insist on it."

Harry read each word with wonder and love, and he couldn't help it when tears started to fall. He could see her in his mind: a red headed girl with a fiery temper, books in her arms and a smile on her lips.

Harry did not interrupt Severus once. He learned that Lily's favorite food was lasagna, and her favorite books were *The Bluest Eye* and *Interview with the Vampire*. She liked animals and loved their family cat. Her wand was 10¼ inches, made from willow, and good for charms, which she wanted to get a career in. She was working on her mastery, but never finished it because she had to take maternity leave.

Harry patiently listened to it all, and by the time Severus finally came to the conclusion he was silently weeping. Unable to talk from choking on any words of thanks he could come up with, Harry took a note from Severus's book and decided to show him how thankful he was instead. He got up from his seat and join Severus, hugging himself against the man's side.

Severus awkwardly patted Harry's back in response, obviously uncomfortable and unfamiliar with having to comfort someone crying against the side of his robes.

It took five minutes for Harry to calm himself, and when he did the first words out of his mouth were: "I want to eat lasagna."

Severus snorted as he pushed Harry back and gave him a handkerchief.

"I know how to make it."

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Their almost fight and Harry's cathartic crying session seemed to clear the air between them once

again. Severus seemed to relax into a routine, and wasn't so snappy, or always looking for a fight. Severus did tell Harry more about Lily, even going as far as to look through the photo album Harry had, and describing the day in question if he had been there to witness it. Harry couldn't thank him enough.

It meant a lot to him when Severus took time to tell him about Lily. He liked the stories Severus told about his and Lily's childhood the most. They were innocent and pure, and Severus was great at describing their surroundings, Lily's mannerisms, and even her tone of voice.

It almost made Harry jealous that Lily had been able to experience every amazing thing she had during her childhood, and that Severus had been with her through it all; playing tag in the hay field, hide and seek in the forest, and even just together in the park. Harry wished he had been there too.

Lily had once had a bout of accidental magic where she made a whole field bloom around her. From those flowers, she had made crowns, one of which Severus had even agreed to wear. For some reason, Harry was the most jealous of that memory.

Living with Severus was turning out to be pleasant. Surprisingly so. Severus was actually a decent roommate. They had their own tasks, but each was willing to pick up the slack if the other was feeling under the weather. Severus usually did the dishes after Harry cooked, so that Kreacher could have some free time. Severus didn't have many annoying habits, and the few he did Harry had learned to live with. Severus's nocturnal wanderings were a norm, and Harry no longer woke up in the middle of the night due to any off sounds in the house. Severus was very attentive about any and all financial matters, as well as keeping stock of the house. It was something Harry tended to forget all the time, so he welcomed it when Severus took it upon himself to have the management of the household in order, and make sure that Grimmauld Place would never run out of gas. Harry paid Severus back by keeping track of him. He was the kind to work himself to exhaustion if no-one stopped him for a moment to make sure he took a break and ate.

Harry often dropped in Severus's laboratory with a plate of snacks. He didn't stay for long so that Severus could keep working, but he always liked to hear what Severus was experimenting with and how things were proceeding.

Their evenings spent together were starting to become the highlight of each of their days.

Today Harry and Severus were taking a walk around the neighborhood to stretch their legs. They took a moment to sit at the park and watch the families that were also there. Harry couldn't wait until Teddy was old enough so he could take him out to play.

Harry felt Severus's thigh press against his to get his attention and turned to see what he wanted. Severus had wrapped a scarf around himself, so Harry didn't see his lips, but the corners of his eyes wrinkled in a gentle smile. Severus pulled his hand from his pocket, squeezed Harry's for a second, before pocketing it again.

Harry looked at his own hand in confusion. The autumn chill was nipping at his fingers, making them cold and stiff, but Severus's hand had for a moment wrapped around his palm, and encompassed it entirely. It had felt so warm, probably from being kept in Severus's pocket, and Harry couldn't help but ponder it. It felt as though the warmth had crept up his arm and stockpiled in his chest.

"What was that for?" Harry asked, swallowing thickly. Severus only did this when he wanted to show thanks for something.

Severus rolled his eyes as if it was obvious and did not explain. He turned back to people watching,

leaving Harry alone in his confusion.

He didn't remember doing anything worth being thanked for lately, so it must have been something else. Maybe Severus was just grateful for things in general. Harry hoped so. He spent a lot of time making sure Severus has everything he needed, and he liked seeing him get comfortable in their house.

Harry shivered a little as the wind picked up, blowing through his thin jacket. He rubbed his fingers together to bring some warmth to them and was once again surprised when Severus stopped him by grasping his hands.

Severus jerked his head and pulled on Harry's hands.

"We don't need to go yet. It's not that cold out here, it's just the wind." Harry explained, and received an exasperated look in return.

Severus pointed at Harry, before rubbing his own arms once, then flicking Harry hard on the forehead.

"Ow!" Harry soothed the aching spot. Instead of using his words to scold him, Severus now resorted to mean flicks of his fingers. It was the same as before, except now Harry had both his pride and forehead smarting. "Fine! I'm cold. I should have taken a thicker jacket." He grumbled and stood up. His butt was cold too, but he would warm as he walked.

Severus led the way, which reminded Harry of Severus's billowing robes, though Severus wasn't wearing them. This was a muggle neighborhood, so Severus was wearing a long black jacket and trousers. Neither billowed, but Severus still moved as if they did. He held his shoulders back, and Harry knew that if his hands weren't in his pockets, they would instead be at his sides, making the small motions necessary to achieve the effect. Harry knew Severus was self-conscious of the habit every time he took off the robe, which was the exact reason Harry rarely saw him without. But every time Harry did, it did funny things to his stomach. Severus' legs were long and his back like marble. His posture was so refined, Harry was almost tempted to ask Severus to teach it to him, but he knew it wouldn't suit him as well as it did Severus.

Harry took longer strides to catch up with Severus and gave his cheeks a pat to snap himself out of it.

"Severus, I have been wanting to ask if you would like to come to the Burrow with me this Sunday." Harry scolded himself for sounding so formal, but he was nervous. He ran his fingers through his hair, probably making it messier than it already was. He was certain Severus would say no, and it baffled him that he was concerned with the fact. Why did it matter to him if Severus came or not?

"The Sunday dinner is when everyone gets together to catch up, but I've missed the last few. Molly usually cooks up a storm."

Severus frowned, as if the thought was either foul or unorthodox. He turned to Harry while still walking forwards, and pressed his fingers to his own chest while mouthing "Me?" Severus still had the notebook with him, but he chose not to bring it up. He didn't like writing the notes himself and they couldn't bring the quill out where muggles could see.

"Yeah. I'm going, and I just wanted to see if you would come too. Molly's making a roast, and I bet they would like to see how you're doing. You don't have to if you don't want to, I just thought it might be nice to get out of the house sometime."

Severus shook his head, as if he couldn't fathom why would he ever want to willingly join the whole herd of Weasleys for anything.

Harry felt himself slouch. He couldn't help the disappointment rising in his chest. He liked spending time with Severus, but that didn't mean they needed to spend every moment together, especially when Severus liked his own space.

Harry's head snapped up when Severus touched his shoulder, and was taken aback by how intently Severus stared into his eyes. Severus tilted his head and gestured his finger between the two of them.

"Yeah, I want you to come. But you don't have to. I know you don't like company." It might be more accurate to say that Severus didn't like Weasley company in particular, but Harry chose to leave that out.

Severus mouthed a "Why," but it seemed more like he was asking himself rather than Harry, as he turned to look forwards without waiting for an answer.

He didn't say anything for the next hundred meters or so, until finally he turned back, looking doubtful as he rubbed Harry's upper arm to get his attention. He nodded and made a small gap between his thumb and pointer finger.

"For a little while? That's great!" Harry immediately perked up. "I can say that you have a potion on the boil, that way you can only stay for so long!"

Severus exhaled, giving a slightly strained smile. Harry was excited to get to spend the day with both his family and Severus.

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The weekend arrived fast. Harry had been ready and waiting for a while now, but Severus took his time to get ready. Not that he was fussy about his appearance, he just didn't want to be hurried, especially not for a meetup he wasn't even that interested in.

When Severus did appear, Harry was momentarily taken aback by how good he looked in a white button down and a black waistcoat. His collar was buttoned up to hide his scars. Harry wasn't quite prepared for the overall image Severus presented. In the house, Severus had worn casual black trousers with a simple shirt, often with the top button left open for some breathing room. He only wore his robes when working in the lab, and often chose casual wear since the renovations would stain any finer clothes, so it was refreshing to see him dressed up. It was just surprising how well he wore white, and disappointing when he put a cloak over it.

"We will take the Floo, so the cloak isn't necessary," Harry said. "You do look great, though," he mentioned as an afterthought.

Severus shook his head with only a mildly scolding look.

Harry himself only had on a casual red shirt and jeans, so maybe he was breaking some form of etiquette when heading to the Burrow dressed as though he already lived there. The Weasleys were almost like family to begin with, so it wasn't as if they would mind.

"Right. Do you want to go first?" Stupid question really, since Severus needed someone to say the address for him. Harry suppressed his self-critic, and instead tossed the Floo powder into the hearth, while gesturing for Severus to go ahead, trying to make it seem intentional. The impression was ruined by his awkward shuffling, before he leaned on the fireplace and brushed his hair back.

Severus didn't spare him a glance as he marched into the fireplace with Harry following right after him.

Immediately, Harry was embraced by chatter and noise as was usual for the Weasley hubbub. Right afterwards he was embraced by Molly.

"Harry, you came! I know you have been busy, but we all missed you. How are the renovations, my dear?" Molly was hustling and bustling as usual. The kitchen was already full, and she had only started loading the table.

"Renovations are great! The first floor is nearly done!" Harry announced, raising his volume automatically to be heard over the others. Ron and Hermione waved at him from the other side of the table. George sat at the far end, while Arthur was toying with some handheld device next to Hermione. It wasn't nearly a full house, but Ron and George were clearly in the middle of a wild conversation, and Hermione was busy trying to explain the device to Arthur.

"What wonderful news. I hope you will invite us to see it once you have finished." Molly kindly laid her hand on Harry's arm. Right then something loud went off, and Harry nearly startled off his feet when a new Weasley product crackled loudly while emitting a weirdly charged smell. Harry stumbled backwards, right into Severus, who grabbed his shoulders and steadied.

"Oh," Harry gasped. "Thank you, Severus." He turned and grasped Severus's sleeve to ground himself. "God, that surprised me." Harry covered his mouth and took a deep breath. He couldn't handle the smell. It smelt familiar, almost tangible, but not quite. Sour, almost electric. It made the hair on his neck rise.

Severus's fingers dug into his arms and Harry snapped to attention. Severus looked at him worriedly.

"I'm fine. It's okay. Just — please open the window." Harry tried to steady himself as Severus steered him to the wall and pried open the window. The next thing he knew, his vision was covered by curly hair.

"Harry! Are you okay? Do you need to sit down for a moment?" Hermione quizzed hastily right before she turned around to glare at her boyfriend. Ron shrugged sheepishly in apology.

Molly was yelling at both George and Arthur to put away their toys so they could finally have dinner in peace.

It all brought Harry back into the present. "I'm fine," he said to Hermione. "Honest. It just caught me by surprise. I'm not having an attack." He was fine. The war was over. He had won.

Hermione searched his eyes for a long moment, before sighing and giving him a relieved smile. "That's good to hear. Take your time and join us at the table." She petted Harry's hand, before retaking her seat. Harry snorted as Hermione swatted Ron on the shoulder and made to join them when he felt Severus's hand around his wrist.

His brows were bunched and his head tilted. He was confused, but there was also an inkling of worry.

"It's—" Harry started, and swallowed. "I'll tell you when we get home, okay?" He didn't want to talk about it right now. He would just work himself back up if he did.

Severus nodded in understanding, and made a motion of catching something, and grasping his fist close to himself. He usually used that motion for things such as, "I'll take it," "It's close to me," or,

"I'll hold on to that." He clearly meant the last in this case.

Harry thanked him both vocally and with a brush on his arm. He was grateful he didn't need to start explaining it now. He just wanted to have a good time without having to worry about something. He got himself seated at the table.

"Sorry about that," he said to the rest of the room.

"Harry, it's perfectly fine. We all get it every now and then," Molly said. Harry offered her a lopsided smile in support. He had talked with Molly and Hermione about this the most. Molly especially was truly understanding, as she had similar issues. Hermione just wanted to research it and help him with whatever she discovered.

And in a familiar pattern, the house fell back into normality as if nothing had happened. They all had their little post war quirks, and they had already established a routine. Help would be offered when needed, but they wouldn't dwell on it, instead choosing to make merry. It worked for Harry exceptionally well.

Severus took his seat next to Harry, and mostly stayed back from the conversation. It didn't last long until Arthur asked him something, and he needed to bring out his quill and notebook. After that, he was busy talking to both Arthur and Hermione at once. They were both taking turns to read his notes, and when they got more immersed in the conversation, they were practically shoulder to shoulder trying to read it at once. Severus had to resort to spells to write in the air before them to stop the silent tug of war that was evolving.

Harry couldn't help but find it all awfully nice and somewhat endearing.

Then Molly brought in the roast, and suddenly everyone was busy filling their plates. At the Weasleys' everyone just grabbed whatever they wanted while there was still something left. Severus tried to wait patiently but was slowly losing patience when people didn't think to look up and see his polite plea to be handed the potatoes.

Harry had been observing him the whole time, mostly out of curiosity to see how Severus fared with Weasleys, and reached to pass the dish for him.

Severus thanked him by brushing their fingers as he took the offered dish.

Once everyone had plated up, silence and order finally settled around the table. The conversation was much calmer in between bites and was only interrupted by someone asking to get passed the roast.

Harry and Severus had a good system between them. Harry would ask for anything that Severus could reach, and Severus would do the same for him with easy to understand hand signals. Their elbows and shoulders occasionally brushed together in silent requests and wordless shows of thanks. They had both started to learn each other's preferences when it came to food, so Harry knew to hand over the Yorkshire pudding without having been asked, and Severus saved him some fried asparagus stalks.

"How do you understand each other?" Ron wondered aloud as Harry handed the milk jug to Severus.

"I don't understand what's hard about it," Harry replied, going back to his own meal.

"He just points at things and you just automatically know which one he means." Ron gestured as if it was some huge deal.

Harry rolled his eyes, pointed down the table, and then held his hands as if he was holding a rectangular object. He stared at Ron, hoping he would get it.

"Oh, the butter?" Ron reached over and handed it to Harry, who laughed openly at him as he dropped the butter on the table.

"It's literally just that easy. You just hold your hand out like you are ready to receive whatever item it is you want, and behold, it shall be handed to you." Harry rolled his eyes, which had Ron reaching over the table to swat at him playfully. Severus leaned aside, looking uncomfortable with Ron almost lying on his plate to reach over.

Ron didn't relent as he withdrew. "Stupid. You just make it seem effortless. He just nudges you and makes some minuscule gesture, and you barely even have to glance at him before you go for it. That's some next-level communication skills, mate."

"As if you don't do that with Hermione all the time! I have seen you having conversations with just your eyebrows!" Harry argued.

Ron wagged his brows at Harry and immediately received a swift kick to the shin.

"Ow, mate. Don't be jealous or anything." Ron grinned and rubbed his leg.

The day continued in the same vein, and Harry was surprised Severus hadn't asked for his excuses to be made. They spent two hours at the Weasleys', even staying for a cup of coffee and light conversation before they headed back home.

Harry still felt elated about the whole day, but for some reason he couldn't stop thinking about Severus being at odds with conversing with so many people at once. Molly had wanted to talk to him, and even Arthur was curious. Writing on air would work if he had a lecture, but with multiple people asking you questions it was a struggle to keep up. Not to mention that it was hard for him to join a conversation before somehow getting the others' attention first.

There was also the fact that a written argument didn't seem nearly as threatening as a proper talking down did. A fact which George had immediately seized onto.

Overall, Harry still counted this visit as a success. Even if Severus would never choose to join him again, he at least had this moment.

He had nearly forgotten about his episode and was thus surprised when Severus held him back and placed a fist against his chest in reminder.

It took a moment for Harry to stop staring at their joined hands and pay attention. Severus raised his right hand up, crooked his pointer finger, and gave his hand a slight shake in question.

"I'm okay." Harry resolved himself for a difficult conversation. "Let's take a seat, I guess." He acquiesced, knowing that up until now he had asked Severus to share far more uncomfortable things than he himself had.

Severus seated himself, then took out his notebook and charmed quill and spelled them over to Harry. "*Are you okay?*" he asked.

Harry slouched in his chair; he felt reluctant but was aware he had to soldier on. "Yeah, I'm fine. Hermione says it's post-traumatic stress, and Molly says it's just stress and that it will pass. I don't really know. It has been a lot better lately, though," Harry assured Severus.

"I used to have them more often in the first month or two after the war, but they're a lot less frequent now. They're shorter, too."

Severus frowned as he considered what Harry said. *"Have you had this before the war?"*

"No. Never." He pulled his feet onto the sofa and shoved his hands under them in the hope it would stop his urge to fidget. "I'm not certain what triggers it, but usually it's either a sound or a smell — maybe even the situation I'm in. Words don't trigger it at all. When it happens, it's not like a flashback or anything like that. It's more like sudden anxiety or panic, maybe."

"Do you know what triggered it this time?" Severus asked as he crossed his legs. He almost resembled a therapist.

"The smell. It's a really specific smell. I recognized it instantly." It was the first time Harry had been able to point to the exact thing he recognized, and from where he remembered it. Usually he just had a feeling that he should prepare for something. As if he wasn't safe. Once he got that feeling, it was difficult not to blow it out of proportion and become paranoid.

"What did it smell like?" Severus frowned, clearly trying to recall what Harry did.

"You know how some spells smell? Like, magic in itself usually doesn't smell like anything, maybe a bit charged — like the static a TV gets on the screen, you know — but some spells smell different. *Wingardium Leviosa* doesn't really smell like anything, but *Bombarda* stinks, right?" Harry hoped that Severus knew what he was talking about, otherwise this would sound stupid.

He was glad to see Severus slowly nodding.

"Okay, so... turns out *Avada Kedavra* has a smell. It's a little different, but that smell at the Burrow was close, even if a million times stronger. I —" Harry swallowed, and shivered. "I knew what I had to do. I wasn't afraid, you know, back then, because —"

Severus shushed him, and Harry looked up with wide misty eyes. *"You don't have to explain it. I understand."*

Harry exhaled. He was glad he didn't have to say it. Back during the war, everything was done out of necessity. He knew what he had to do, he didn't even think about it — it was do or die trying, and he absolutely needed to take Voldemort down with him. He had managed to isolate the thought of dying from his mind while he did what he had to. He had pushed through it and kept going on sheer adrenaline alone. Only after the war was won had he realized that he *had died*. He had literally died for the cause — but not permanently. Somehow, he survived, and suddenly it all rushed right back to him. The feeling of isolation. The impending doom. The adrenaline and anxiety. All those things that he had so admirably suppressed he was finally living through, and it overwhelmed him.

He felt so exhausted.

"Have you had these attacks while I have been living here?" The notebook nudged his arm gently and Harry held onto it as one would cling to a friend.

"Not really?" He glanced at Severus. "There were a couple of close calls, but every time you were right there. It's easier to snap out of it when someone familiar is nearby. You are familiar and you weren't *there*. So if you're here now, then I must not be back there. Does that make any sense to you?" He had been rambling again.

"When was this?" Severus asked, as if trying to pinpoint the specific moment.

"Nothing really happened, I swear!" He hadn't properly had an anxiety attack in either of the flare-ups he'd had since Severus arrived. "The first one was when you had the nightmare. It's kind of hard to get my bearings immediately after waking up. And the second time was when you startled me in the hallway. For a moment there I was worried, but then I remembered that it was you and I calmed back down. I'm used to you now, though." He hadn't been surprised by any sudden noises or rustles in the night in a long time. He used to have night terrors when sleeping here alone, when he couldn't explain a sudden sound. It didn't help that he would work himself into a frenzy while trying to find the source. It usually passed with time, but it was easier now when literally any noise could be explained by Severus without further questioning.

"I understand. I'm glad you told me. Do many people know about this?"

"No. Only Hermione and the Weasleys. I had one panic attack when the press surrounded me, but Hermione was really cool with that one. Ron managed to take me aside for some fresh air."

Severus nodded understandingly. *"If you have any more moments like that, please let me know. I'll try to help you if I can. I can even carry a Calming Draught, just in case."*

Harry wasn't sure if he would need a potion for such a thing, especially since his attacks didn't last long, but he knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth. "Thank you." He was truly grateful that Severus had offered. It was heartwarming to know that he had Harry's well-being in mind. Harry felt like squeezing Severus's hand as a thank you, or something, but chose to withhold himself.

"Think nothing of it."

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For the next few days, Harry couldn't shake the idea of Severus with his notebook from his mind. For some reason Harry couldn't stop observing him. Severus needed to carry it around at all times. It became obsolete in the rain, the quill was forbidden in muggle neighborhoods, and Harry remembered how inconvenient it had been in a group conversation. There just had to be a better way.

He met up with Hermione to talk about it. They started by creating a list of things that were already close to replicating someone's sound, like the charmed instruments, portraits and howlers. After that, they started investigating how they were made. Wizard photographs used a potion while they developed to become animated. The instruments were charmed. The paintings and howlers enchanted.

They found out the Sonorous Charm, which created an amplified roar from your wand, might be a good starting point. Obviously, they had to find a way to quieten it down and also figure out how to broadcast only the intended thoughts.

And that was where the real struggle began. Turns out making sound is easy, finding any sort of control and finesse, on the other hand, is hard.

Hermione suggested Harry find a vessel that could be used to bind the charms together and work from there. She got him a reference book on how to choose the material, as well as a number of other useful books about spell creation and charming objects.

Harry turned one of the extra rooms into a work room for when he would try to create a voice piece for Severus. He wanted to keep it a secret, so he opted to work on it only when Severus was in his lab. Severus was naturally curious, and even paranoid, so Harry tried to not gain his interest

whatsoever. He knew perfectly well that once Severus started to wonder what he was up to, his workroom door would be blasted across the hall in seconds.

It was uncharacteristic of Harry to be so secretive, but he truly wanted it to be a surprise. He wanted to make the best possible solution to Severus's problem, and he wanted to present it with flourish and earn Severus' approval. A thank you would be nice, but not necessary — all he wanted was to impress him. He had accepted Hermione's help but still wanted to make it mostly by himself.

Harry was extremely thankful for the noise-cancelling charms on Severus's lab, because what he had invented during the first week was definitely not ideal. He had chosen a crystal box and placed the charm inside. Right now, it was screaming non-stop. Harry had no other choice but to dismantle it. It turns out that creating charms was an interesting process. You had to include a lot of different spells and incantations to get the desired effect. And if that didn't work, it was easier to take it apart and build it anew with your renewed designs.

Once again, Hermione had nudged him into the right direction by suggesting he research the Remembrall. The glass surface of the Remembrall was engraved with charms, and even the golden band around it had much the same but with runes. It helped that one of the books Hermione got him happened to be a basic guide to runes.

By the second week, Harry finally managed to create a box that talked when you held it. He was so proud he felt as if he could dance with joy, but he restrained himself. It didn't feel finished yet. It felt impersonal. Right now, the box narrated every thought that passed through your head, so it obviously needed some filters before it could be put to use. It had another problem: it sounded awfully boring. It narrated everything in a monotone voice that verged on creepy. He would need to find a way for the box to imitate the user's own voice. He was also curious if it could be used to pronounce spell incantations. If that were the case, then it would be better to have it hover close by, so that you can have both hands free in case you needed to duel or work more efficiently.

The fine-tuning turned out to be the most difficult part of the entire project. Harry constantly experienced problems; some charms didn't work well together, some didn't produce the desired effect in the slightest, and some he had to alter drastically to get what he wanted. It was near impossible to get the box to sound like the user, and not just whoever was closest, as he noticed when the box kept altering between Hermione's and his voice. Even when he tried to enchant the cube to only respond to his magical signature, the voice fell flat. It did sound like him, sure, but it didn't have any personality in its speech. He was starting to get frustrated, because he had been stuck on this same spot for weeks now. Maybe the charms weren't even the right answer, but then he had found nothing in runes or even potions that would help him.

He was currently taking a break, so he welcomed the distraction that was Severus Snape.

"You haven't been doing much work on the renovations lately," Severus commented as Harry worked on the upstairs walls.

"I've been stuck on a project," Harry mumbled, "so I needed a break to do something simple." He glanced at Severus before going back to prying apart the wall to check the insulation. He couldn't trust Grimmer to not have water damage, or god knows what hidden within its walls.

"What kind of project? Is that why Granger has been here so often?" Harry cursed mentally, running his hand through his hair as he racked his brain for an excuse.

"Teddy's bedroom. I want it to have some personality, but it always falls flat."

"Do you mean furniture or wallpaper? You could paint the walls. Maybe add a mural of a meadow," Severus suggested, and Harry had to admit it sounded like a good idea. He should do that.

"Yeah! With animals and everything! Maybe a forest, so I can add wolves and unicorns and everything!" Harry enthused, turning around to smile at Severus. It was moments like this when Harry truly appreciated his genius. "Hey, what would you want to put in there? Do you think the animals are a good idea?" Harry genuinely wanted to know.

"It's a great idea," Severus said. *"Maybe you could even include forest themed furniture, and some toys. We could even build him a den."*

Harry banished the old newspapers used to insulate the walls and replaced them with glass wool. "I bet he would love that. Once he grows older, his imagination is bound to come up with cool games he can play. Having a magical forest right in his room sounds really awesome," Harry said, before wondering aloud: "But how do you get the painted animals to move? Is it the same magic used in paintings? I want them to do more than just running around the field and grazing a bit."

"Well, it is pretty much a magical portrait. How animated it is depends on the painter's magical power — which you have — as well as their impression of the object. As we can't use memories, I suggest watching a muggle documentary about wild horses and wolves."

Harry frowned. Maybe he could use that to create the voice cube. Maybe he just had to concentrate on Severus's characteristics really hard. "Why can't we use memories?"

"Where the fuck would you get unicorn memories from?" Severus scoffed, and Harry stared at him in wide-eyed astonishment. The memories. He had Severus's memories. He could use those to give the voice box Severus's characteristic speech pattern.

"You are a fucking genius," Harry gasped, causing Severus to look taken aback, staring at Harry as if he had lost his mind.

"If you are too much of an idiot to not reference muggle documentaries or other applicable examples, then I must appear a saint." Apparently, the whole conversation was beyond Severus, because he chose that moment to extract himself from the conversation. *"I'll pick the colors. I won't have any candy floss unicorns in this house."*

Harry didn't even register what he had just read as he dropped everything and ran to his bedroom. He had put Severus's memories in a drawer somewhere. He had always had the full intention of returning them, but he had forgotten all about it since Severus had moved in. Boy was he glad for his forgetfulness for once.

He took the memories and immediately ran to his workroom. He cast several locking spells on the door — hopefully enough that he had time to hide the evidence if Severus came barging in.

"Prototype. I have to create a prototype first." He didn't dare mess up with Severus's memories. He would just make a version with his own memories for now, and if it worked, then he would take it apart and do the same with Severus'.

It took him two hours just get everything set up for the prototype. It was harder than he thought to get the memories inside the cube in a way that they remained accessible, but didn't play out as in the Pensieve.

When he finally tested it for the last time, it worked like a charm. Harry couldn't resist laughing at

the unintentional pun. It did have countless charms included, after all. The cube finally knew how to separate thoughts from actual speech. It intoned his voice perfectly. It didn't stray off topic, or try to become aware, as he had accidentally managed to make it to do just a moment earlier. He added a charm that made it only answer to his own command, and he noticed that it was far easier this time, since the memories automatically favored him. He needed Hermione to test it to make sure.

Harry twiddled with the cube, tossing and turning it in his hands. He was already impatient to give it to Severus, but he couldn't bear it if it didn't work after all. He had kept it a secret for almost a month now.

It felt like ages waiting for Hermione to get off from university.

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The prototype was a success. Harry made the adjustments to make it work for Severus, and he packaged it in a fine gift box he had bought earlier. He didn't add any decorations to the box, because he knew Severus didn't appreciate any extra confetti. He was extremely proud of it and couldn't wait to show it to Severus.

But for some reason, he felt really nervous. He hoped desperately that Severus would like it, but he didn't really know how to present it. Why had he even wrapped it? He could easily just toss it to Severus, and he was sure Severus would be just as glad. Instead, he had turned it into a huge thing with a gift box and everything. It wasn't even Christmas, so why was he trying so hard?

Harry felt his ears burn with the thought of suddenly presenting Severus with a present out of nowhere, but refused to bow to it. He had already packaged it. He would do it.

The box was small and fit in his pocket, even if it made an awkward tent.

Harry had no idea when best to give it to Severus. Over a meal? Or should Harry knock on his door right now? Leave it on his bed so that he could find it on his own?

In the end Harry went through the whole day with the box burning in his pocket. He had never found a moment when he could give it to Severus without looking like a fool.

Which is why it turned out to be way more anticlimactic than Harry had ever expected. After all, if there was one thing Harry definitely wasn't, it was subtle and discreet.

"What are you waiting before you propose? Just whip out the box already. You have been fiddling with your pockets for hours." Severus was seated for their evening talk by the fire, with his arms crossed and presenting a sour, annoyed scowl. *"But if you are going to propose, I will sadly have to decline. We haven't even been on any dates yet."*

Harry's whole face burned with shame. "It's not a ring." He took out the box and felt himself get even more flustered. Oh god, what if it had been a ring? He was pretty sure that if he had taken more time, he could have been able to fit it in a ring design. Thank god it was just a box.

"Not a ring." He repeated as he put the box on the table. He could barely face Severus with how nervous and awkward he was feeling. He had worked so hard on the thing, and now he felt choked up.

He hoped Severus would like it. Even the packaging was chosen with care. Harry had bought it from Diagon Alley before. The box was black, sturdy paperboard with a matte print. It fit Severus as a person — subtle, yet stylish — so Harry had bought it without considering it further.

"It's a gift. I guess," Harry admitted as he rubbed his neck. He wanted his blush to fade already. "I made it myself."

"A craft project? A macaroni painting for your favorite teacher? Is this what you needed Granger's help for?" Severus teased, and Harry felt a bit of the normalcy between them return.

"Stop teasing me or I'm taking it back!" Harry blustered, but he grinned all the same. He pretended to make for it, but Severus pulled it away from his reach.

"Too late now." He grinned back, cracking the lid of the box open.

Harry watched entranced as Severus inspected the item. He picked it up and turned it around in his hands. The voice box was a smooth, clear crystal, with charms inscribed on it. It had golden corners engraved with runes, and inside you could see a milky, almost silver mist. When Severus touched it, the mist glowed with near a blue hue. It fit perfectly in his palm, and when he held it up, it hovered lightly in the air.

Harry could practically feel the excitement prickling at his skin.

"What is it?" Severus asked, his voice resounding in the room, the confusion audible, and he looked so surprised that he would have dropped it had the box not hovered on its own. Harry was glad he had cast every protective charm he knew on the cube.

"Merlin," Severus gasped, hand on his chest before he reached to touch the box reverently. "And you made this? How? Why?"

Harry almost felt he could whoop with joy. Severus liked it! All his hard work had been for a reason.

"Hermione helped, but I did the most of it. She helped me find books to read and give me some ideas on how to go about making it, but I did all the spells." Harry stuck out his chest proudly. "It took me weeks!" A month, at least. "I could see how difficult it was using the notebook with several people, and no offense, but I kind of hate getting stabbed with the corners." Harry rubbed his side, remembering how nastily the notebook had pestered him when he was trying to concentrate on renovating.

"Oh, and your memories, the ones you gave me, I put them inside the box. So, theoretically I just returned them back to you, but they are sort of necessary to keep the box working right, so... I'm sorry you can't have them back. Unless you want to exchange them with some other memories of yours." Harry rubbed his hand sheepishly. He wasn't sure if Severus would appreciate that. They had been precious memories for him, and he would probably want to remember them.

Now they were precious memories for Harry, too. He had watched them countless times, and they had saved his life in the end. He was happy to use them in the cube; they had sentimental value. It was almost as if the memories were shared between Severus and him, even if Harry did not appear in them, as such. There was also the surprise element, of course, and now some of Severus's better memories would follow him always.

Severus opened his mouth, unsure what to say. The box waited patiently for him to. "It's amazing. Thank you, Harry."

It was the first time Harry actually heard Severus say his first name out loud, without a sneer or a belittlement, and it felt as if his chest would explode. It distracted him enough that he didn't even notice Severus come close until the man had his arm on his shoulder. For the first time Severus

was the one initiating a hug. It was short and brief squeeze, but Severus still enveloped him. Harry didn't waste time being surprised and flung his hands around Severus, hugging him tight. He buried his face in Severus's shoulder and breathed in. He could smell the potions clinging to him, as well as his aftershave. Severus smelled spicy and smoky, probably from brewing, and his aftershave smelled like a forest — clean and fresh. Harry barely had time to hug back before Severus retreated, leaving Harry feeling oddly disappointed. He remembered Severus's palms resting flat against his back, and it left him feeling as though someone had trapped a small bird in his chest. It kept fluttering and thrashing around, as if trying to escape. Harry absentmindedly rubbed his chest, trying to calm his excited heart.

"What do you call it? It's damn near miraculous." Severus watched as the box followed him, always hovering on the right side of his head, a bit higher and to the side so it didn't obstruct his vision. He tested the tracking on the box, and it moved smoothly and fluidly. It bobbed slightly in the air beside him, and when he talked, it gave a gentle blue glow.

Harry had to remind himself to stay attentive. "I didn't give it a name. It's just a voice box or cube for now." He shrugged.

"A literal voice box, how original," Severus joked, pushing the box lightly only to watch it return to its spot. "Vocal Cube sounds good enough. You should sell these so others can have the chance to talk again. It's amazing how it sounds like I used to."

"I will consider it; I liked working on it. I took it apart so many times, I could make more of them in my sleep." Harry wasn't even kidding. Taking apart and casting the charms over and over again had truly left its mark. It had been challenging but fun too. And he knew there would be many people who would need aid with their everyday life. Especially after the war. Maybe he could start making physical aids for people with disabilities. He had seen hearing aids and prostheses in the muggle world, but Ron's great-great aunt still used an ear trumpet. Moody had used a glass eye, but it was quite unnerving. The wizarding world could use magic like Harry's Vocal Cube.

"That's a good idea, Severus. I could even start working on other kinds of physical aids. I could take courses on it too. Why don't wizards have more of them to begin with?" Harry asked, feeling elated. If Severus thought he was good enough to make a business out of these, it was a high praise indeed.

Severus frowned as he considered it. "We have magic. It's supposed to fix everything. If the magic can't fix it, some think it was something they deserved. There are still many unjust facts about the wizarding world."

"That's not right. Everyone deserves better. Especially you. Now with your voice back, you can even teach again if you want."

Severus scoffed. "As if I'd ever go back to that. I have been brewing whatever I want on my own for a month. There is nothing that can make me give that up now. I can finally become an independent brewer and focus on experimental potions if I so desire."

"That's great." And it was. Severus looked so different now. Physically he was the same, but mentally a lot more open and prepared.

Severus turned back to him, laying his hand on Harry's shoulder and instantly reawakening the thrashing bird inside Harry. "Thank you, once again. With this I can hold conferences. I can even get an apprentice if I want. It truly means a lot to me."

Harry's cheeks heat again. "It's no problem."

"You have done a lot for me, and not just with this box. You know that, right?"

Harry bashfully turned his head but nodded. Having Severus here was amazing. Harry liked renovating the house with him, and he liked having breakfast together. He liked their evening walks, and their talks by the fire too. He even liked fighting over the wallpapers and wondering what to do with the overgrown garden.

He liked how Severus's hand was still on his shoulder, and he liked the butterflies that fluttered around in his stomach. He was glad he had worked so hard to make the Vocal Cube. He was glad he didn't need to wake up to an empty house anymore.

He liked Severus.

Severus slid his hand down Harry's shoulder to his upper arm. It sent shivers down Harry's entire arm, and he didn't want Severus to let go, but regretfully Severus did, as he turned Harry around, and pushed him towards the stairs.

"Now get to bed. You waited so long to give me this thing, that we've stayed up later than usual. You have a lot of renovation work to do in the morning. But I can help you in the evening."

They both walked side by side upstairs, and Severus walked Harry to his door. They were shoulder to shoulder. Harry could almost feel the heat radiate from Severus. At Harry's door, Severus reached to run his fingers through Harry's hair, before continuing down the hall with the Cube calling "Night, brat!" over his shoulder. Harry couldn't help but watch the firm line of Severus's retreating shoulders. He followed Severus with his eyes until he rounded a corner, then Harry hustled into his room.

Once inside, he slammed shut the door and leaned against it. He buried his hands in his hair as Severus had just done. His scalp still tingled where Severus had touched him. His stomach felt the same as it had after a mug of mint-liquor-boosted hot chocolate.

Oh god, he *liked* Severus.

The bird in his chest flew free.

Chapter Five

If Harry had thought Severus' physical responses would lessen now that his voice was back, he was grievously mistaken. While he couldn't prove that they had increased either, it sure felt like it now that he was painfully aware of Severus' every move.

He tried to distract himself with the renovations, but all his hard work put into not thinking about his crush was absolutely wrecked by Severus. Severus — whom no force on earth could convince to teach Harry Potions — had got it into his head to at least make sure Harry knew how to pick fresh, high quality ingredients. He defended his reasoning with the fact that, if Harry were to visit Diagon Alley and happen to pick up some ingredients for him, he refused to be ripped off if Harry failed to tell a fresh shrivelfig apart from the already half-wilted stock.

The lessons ended up being half torture, half blessing. Severus was glad to show Harry how to check for quality, and Harry was always eager for any excuse to spend time with him. The downside was that it was oftentimes awfully hands-on, and Harry couldn't take the lethal combination of Severus' smooth voice and long fingers showing him how to tell when something was ripe. Sometimes you had to tap a fruit and listen. Sometimes you needed to squeeze them to see if they gave. Sometimes you had to split the mushroom top to see if it was worm-eaten. None of those things should in any way be fascinating or arousing, but Severus sure knew how to keep Harry's attention. Maybe not on the ingredients, but on everything else. It was almost ridiculous how attentive Harry became when there was a chance of impressing Severus on offer.

And like a true Gryffindor, he couldn't resist acting like a fool doing just that. It didn't matter if it was cooking, picking up ingredients, or renovating.

When the evening came, and he was finally left alone in his room, he lay awake for hours trying to comprehend just what was wrong with him.

It was ridiculously easy to notice that Severus was really awesome. He was good at spells and he always knew what to do in any given situation. He was probably better at renovating than Harry, but he preferred guiding Harry rather than taking an active role when possible. He had restocked Grimmauld Place with potions of his own make, and made sure to carry several on the chance that Harry ever so much as winced. He was refined, and the image of his strong shoulders would never leave Harry's mind.

It was absolutely ridiculous. Harry knew Severus was full of flaws. He had even listed them at some point or another in his youth, but now he also knew that Severus was a great conversationalist, good at listening, and surprisingly considerate.

And yet here Harry was, crushing on him anyway. He had never before had a crush on a man, but all the signs were there. Especially the fluttering in his stomach, the awkward stumbling, and the almost ridiculous need to show off. He cursed James' genes, because if this kept on continuing, he would sink this ship before it had even left the harbor.

Not that he dared to take any steps to actually show Severus he was interested. Harry was painfully aware how much of a wet-eared brat, barely out of his adulthood, he must seem to Severus. Severus probably saw him as a roommate at best, or a necessary inconvenience at worst. It didn't help at all that Harry was an awkward mess when trying to interact with a crush. Constant stuttering and hair fixing. His nerves just didn't allow him to relax in Severus' presence, so if Severus still somehow saw him in a good light, a miracle must have been involved.

Harry was just grateful he hadn't tried to smile at Severus while drinking, lest he repeat the same mistake he did with Cho.

Harry was tempted to talk to Hermione about it. She could probably whip him into shape, but he didn't even dare to think about how he would approach that conversation.

It wasn't that he was ashamed, but he didn't want to be judged either.

The first week after he'd figured out his crush, he had adamantly tried to convince himself that he did *not* find Severus attractive. Sure, he was great to hang out with, but it couldn't work physically — could it?

Yes. Yes, it could. It was ridiculous. Severus had long, greasy hair that fell in tangles. It just couldn't be attractive. But Harry had touched it, and it had felt so smooth and thick. He knew Severus got truly greasy after a day making potions, but for some god-awful reason he couldn't be dissuaded.

His nose was a veritable beak. Yet it only took a moment for Harry to consider how it would feel when following the path of Severus' kisses, and suddenly he was at half-mast.

Severus's teeth were discolored and crooked, but Harry couldn't even concentrate on judging them when his lips were so refined and firm. If he kissed the way he talked, Harry would be a goner.

Truly unbelievable.

Physically incompatible — as if.

There was some good to come out of this, at least. Harry had learned so many new silencing and locking spells since he started this exercise in futility.

It was way too late in the night. He would be falling asleep in his breakfast come morning. But there was no way he could fall asleep with a hard-on. He couldn't help himself — cold showers only pushed back the inevitable.

He only needed to think about the hug Severus had given him, about how Severus' hands had run through Harry's hair, and the fantasy would complete itself from there on. It was too easy to come up with a setting. Both of them on the sofa Harry always sat on at the end of the day. The fire would be lit. Severus would crowd his space, just as when he had hugged him. His hands everywhere. In Harry's hair. Squeezing at his hip. They would rut against each other, and it would be amazing. Harry would lie over Severus' chest, and they would kiss as they brought each other over the edge.

Harry had always preferred to lie on his stomach, so he could rut against the mattress while he slowly jerked off. He hadn't yet dared to fantasize about anything more intimate than kisses, and hands eagerly pressing the other down while they moved against each other.

It was a true shame, because Harry knew what Severus looked like underneath his clothes, yet he didn't quite dare to go that far. They might shed their shirts in Harry's fantasy, but their trousers had always stayed on. He almost cursed himself for missing out on a great opportunity when he had had it.

What an idiot he had been. Right now, he would do anything if it meant he got to touch Severus, even if it was to massage his feet, but he hadn't even taken a peek when he was able to, like a true gentleman.

That chance was gone. Now all the washing he got to do were his numerous stained sheets.

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Severus put a hand on the small of Harry's back to guide him out of the house before locking the doors. It sent shivers up Harry's spine, but he refused to acknowledge them now.

"Thanks for coming with me. I can Apparate us," Harry offered, but Severus shook his head.

"It's my turn this time."

Why ever either of them didn't just Apparate on their own, Harry did not know or care, as long as it meant he could hold on to Severus. "The wards end at the street."

Severus knew this but did not make a comment. Instead he pulled Harry snug against his side with a casual arm around Harry's waist, and Apparated them the minute they were outside the wards and he had confirmed there were no muggles to witness it.

They arrived in an alley close to the Leaky Cauldron, and Severus slowly relinquished his hold.

Harry couldn't help tensing in excitement when Severus's arm brushed his lower back, but was disappointed when it disappeared altogether. He really would not have minded Severus holding on to him a little longer.

Severus took the lead with his long legs, but he slowed his usual gait to match with Harry's shorter steps. They entered Diagon Alley, and Severus steered Harry to the side before an exiting group of foreign wizards managed to mow him over.

"Careful there," Severus commented, as he straightened his back and firmed his face. His presence alone managed to clear them a path. He always exuded confidence and determination, and everyone instinctively moved out of his way. "Stick close. I don't want to stay longer than it takes to come and go."

Harry grinned, sticking close to Severus's side. It was probably slightly closer than Severus had meant, but he did have an invitation. "I don't believe that for a second. You insisted on coming." Harry was glad Severus had. He had prepared to spend ages convincing him.

"Knowing you, you would have bought half the shop, yet still somehow managed to buy only odds and ends." Severus sounded fond, despite his words.

"It's only furniture and toys, how much can you go wrong with that?" Harry caught Severus rolling his eyes.

"One might think that," Severus said softly, but Harry knew him better than that. Severus was secretly invested in making Teddy's room the absolute best it could be. They had already finished with the renovations it needed, and had even painted the walls. Severus was a surprisingly decent hand in drawing the animals, and Harry had done the spells. It looked better than either of them had anticipated, so now Severus refused to have Harry ruin everything by filling it with redundant furnishings.

Severus' fears were also legitimized since he had seen Harry's efforts at decorating. Once again, Harry had tried to impress him by finishing one room completely on his own, before Severus finished brewing. He had ended up having to redo the entire room. Despite the affront to any interior decorator out there, Severus had called it a "Nice try," before taking it all down.

They entered a shop way too bright and multicolored for Severus to be in, and it was a miracle he did not protest about it as they started browsing.

"I will get all the furniture. You get the toys," Severus announced as he instantly set his eyes on a cot. "And try to pick up toys actually meant for a child his age."

Harry lowered the toy wolf he had just picked up, but then proceeded to hug it against himself. "Just the Marauders for when he grows older." He wasn't begging, but his batting eyelashes said differently.

"You know they are not safe for him, so if you insist upon it, at least store them separately until he's old enough." Severus sighed, and Harry grinned the moment he turned his back. Severus was firm enough to cut short any bullshit, so it always felt like a victory when he let Harry have his way.

They browsed the store separately at first, but sought each other out eventually. Severus wanted Harry's opinion on some of the furniture, and Harry wanted to show him some of the better toys he found. He also mentioned toys they should consider for when Teddy grew older.

They got themselves quite a few things, all Severus-approved, and Severus shrank the bag full of their purchases before pocketing it. Magic was truly great when you could fit both furniture and toys all in the same little pouch.

Afterwards, they visited the mail office so that Severus could owl order all the furniture he had noted down from catalogs. The house renovation was finally reaching the point where they could start decorating, and Harry was already looking forward to when Teddy could be brought over.

"Should we childproof the house, do you think?" Harry asked as Severus stepped away from the counter. "If Teddy's coming to visit, it should be safe for him."

"There are several charms which can be put in place. We only need to make sure everything is in its rightful place, and the spells should return them back there after use. There are also spells to make sure a child can't reach certain things, as well as monitoring charms," Severus explained, letting Harry walk out first.

"Oh, those are really nifty. Do you know the spells?" Harry had never needed them before, so he didn't have a clue.

"Not off the top of my head, but we can get a book on it."

Harry nodded and immediately changed course for the bookstore. "Do we need anything else?"

"Do you think you know how to take care of an infant? I would guess no." Severus would be right. Harry knew absolutely nothing about how to take care of a small child, and his own upbringing definitely could not be used as an example. Oh god, what did small children even eat? What did he eat when he was that young, when Petunia surely did not want anything to do with him?

"I might need more than one book," Harry admitted, and Severus laughed politely.

"One might think we were adopting a child, instead of only child-minding." And right he was. They were both clueless when it came to taking care of small children. Harry personally doubted Severus would be any good at it, but he also thought it would be adorable if he was. He decided to give him the benefit of the doubt, until further notice.

It helped that the thought of them raising a kid together was charming, but Harry kept that to

himself.

They bought more books than necessary. Severus had got a number about how to raise a child, and several on spells and charms absolutely need to know for new parents. Harry had filled his arms with children's stories, and books about accidental magic, as well as childcare for first-time parents.

The cashier gave them a weird look, but thankfully said nothing of it. Severus insisted on pocketing the books before Harry even tried to pick them up.

"I can carry some of the purchases too," Harry complained, but Severus shook his head, refusing adamantly.

"You paid for them. I get to carry them and pay for our dinner."

"I can pay for my own meal!"

"You make my meals and pay for my food and lodging, so stop insisting. I will pay for our meal." Well, when put like that, it did make sense.

Severus led them to a restaurant in Diagon Alley. It wasn't anything too fancy, but it was in a whole different league than the Leaky Cauldron. Harry had not eaten here before, so he took a good look around. It had a comfortable setting with booths and the music was relaxing. It was a step up from Hermione, Ron's, and his usual diner.

Harry and Severus took a booth in the corner, with Severus facing the room and Harry opposite him. The booths were spacious, and the place was well lit. There was a bar at the front, but Harry didn't have much time to take it all in when Severus handed him a menu.

"Wow, this place has courses," Harry blurted as he looked at the appetizer menu. It was only three courses — an appetizer, a main course, and dessert — but it was still new to Harry.

"Feel free to pick anything you want," Severus said as he perused his menu.

A waitress came by to ask for their drinks, so Harry got himself a butterbeer, which they surprisingly did sell here, and Severus got himself water to drink, and the house wine.

"Somehow it does not surprise me that you still prefer to stick with butterbeer," Severus noted as the waitress left to let them consider their foods.

"It's good! Wine is always so—" Harry paused to consider it. "Sour." He cringed. He had only had wine once, after the war when Molly and Arthur had held a celebration. Mind you, it was only a small portion, but Harry had ended up having to water it down anyways.

"Immature men with immature tastes." Severus was teasing, and Harry could tell he didn't really mean it, but couldn't let it pass either way.

"Hey, my taste isn't that bad, you eat everything I make!" It was a valid defense.

"Not to say you shouldn't experiment with variety." Severus turned the menu so it faced Harry. "Have you ever tasted Roquefort snails? They are delicious, despite what one might think."

Harry frowned. People ate snails? For real?

Severus's expression said he had expected the reaction. "Unless of course you are too scared to try."

A Gryffindor was never scared in the face of new things. Especially not when it was obviously a dare. "Fine. I will order them as an appetizer, but I will have Carbonara as my main. And—" Harry eyed the dessert menu, trying to locate the sweetest thing they had. Most of the things sounded foreign, so it was a bit of a guesswork. "Creme brulee." It sounded creamy. He probably butchered the name; there were too many accents.

"Crème brûlée," Severus corrected him, "but it was close."

Harry straightened his back self-righteously.

"Baby steps on trying new foods, but we are getting somewhere." Severus quirked the corner of his mouth in an almost-there smile. Harry slumped back in his seat. There was no pleasing the man.

The waitress returned to bring their drinks and ask if they were ready to order. Severus told her both their orders. He had chosen baked brie as an appetizer, a bloody steak served with a jacket potato and sour cream dip for his main, and a dessert of a simple slice of apple pie with a cup of coffee. Harry was more interested in Severus approving the wine with a small sip, before the waiter poured him a glass.

Once they were left alone, Harry felt a bit anxious about his choice of appetizer. Gladly, Severus had a topic to distract him with.

Surprisingly, it had to do with spell creation, and it was only the small dip into the process of making the Vocal Cube that helped Harry somewhat hold his own.

Severus knew a lot about the subject, and he actually seemed to have an interest in it, judging by the way he talked. Harry was happy to listen, and he tried to remember all the personal stories Severus had. They were really informative, and Harry found himself curious to try some of it out for himself. Severus had an interesting way of working backwards when it came to spell creation, with a lot of actual theory about it, while Harry had mostly gone by instinct.

Trial and error served him well, and even Severus begrudgingly agreed to that, despite his slight scoff.

It said something about their investment in the topic, when both of them were taken off guard by the waitress.

The snails were still sizzling in the cast iron dish they came in. The shells were thankfully not included. The pan had weird little cups in it, in which each snail sat.

"What's the difference between this, and, er, the other snail thing?" Harry stalled.

"Escargot," Severus supplied. "They are both served in garlic butter sauce, but Roquefort has blue cheese melted on top."

"Right. How are you meant to eat this? Do you just eat them as is?"

"If you want. You can use the small spoon to take them out, and eat them with the bread. It's good. I promise." Severus was clearly catching onto his stalling, so Harry did as he was instructed.

The snail looked gray and weird toppled on the corner of his bread. Kind of shriveled, or maybe that was just the natural shape — he did not know. He tried to give it a discreet sniff, but the cheese and garlic hid everything.

He tried not to make a face as he opened his mouth wide and took a huge bite of his bread. He

chewed firmly, preparing for any and all surprises, and it took him a moment to even concentrate on the taste. The garlic butter was delicious, and even the cheese was really tasty.

He hummed in thought, as he chewed more slowly, trying to take the flavors apart.

"This is actually pretty good. You can't really taste the snail much," Harry said after he swallowed. "The texture is a bit like rubber, though."

"They don't have much flavor, no, but the dish itself is delicious." Severus cut a piece of cheese for the bread he had. "I bet you were expecting it to taste like dirt," he said before biting down.

Harry grimaced, and gestured a tiny amount with his pointer and thumb.

"At least I now know you trust me enough to eat dirt if I said it was delicious." Severus grinned. Harry snorted, and kicked Severus' leg under the table.

"You did not just make me eat snails just to call me a dirt eater!" Harry's ears were red, but he refused to be mad, since the snails were actually surprisingly decent.

"Brat." It sounded more affectionate than usual, and Harry relished it.

They ate their appetizers with small dinner conversation, and Harry was surprised to realize that he hadn't moved his leg since kicking Severus under the table. The sides of their feet were pressed together, and he was even more surprised that Severus had not pushed Harry away. There was plenty of space without them having to sit knee to knee, yet he did not seem to mind.

It was disappointing when Severus sat up straighter when the main course was brought in. He wanted to test if Severus would have minded if he tried to rest even more of his leg against Severus' shin.

The food looked and smelled delicious, but it was still a poor consolation.

"Remember to mix the pasta so the raw egg can cook a little." Severus surprised Harry to attention.

"There is raw egg in this?"

"Real pasta carbonara doesn't have cream. Instead it's made with raw egg, cooked with the heat given by the freshly made pasta." Severus gestured, and Harry mixed as he was told. He sprinkled plenty of parmesan cheese on top, and wondered if he had to wait a little, or if he could just dig right in. It looked absolutely delicious.

He took a glance at Severus, who was cutting his steak. It was soft and bursting with juice and flavor as he cut it. Harry followed the morsel to Severus's lips as he ate it. Harry swallowed himself when Severus licked the red juice from his lips.

"Have you had a rare steak before?" Severus asked as he cut off a small piece.

Harry shook his head enthusiastically.

"It's safe to cook lightly with red meats other than pork. Venison, for example, is very juicy and tender." Severus held the fork aloft with the piece of meat in show, the sides red and juicy, but the surface nicely seared.

"What about the blood?" Harry gestured to the juice beading on the meat.

"It's not blood, it's myoglobin, and it's safe to eat." Severus held his other hand under the fork as he

brought it over to Harry. Harry didn't even hesitate to have a taste. It was great; juicy, and a bit chewy, yet it almost melted in his mouth.

Harry moaned as he swallowed, then picked up his own utensil. "I better get started on mine or I'll eat both our food. But it was delicious. Thank you." The cheese had melted perfectly, and he was sure the egg was fine to eat by now. He used the fork and spoon to roll some pasta on his fork, remembering his manners at the last moment.

"Do you want to taste this?" Harry asked, despite already being hungry. The steak had turned his appetite ravenous. Or maybe it was just Severus doing that for him.

"No, but I thank you for the offer," Severus declined. Harry was a bit disappointed he didn't get to feed Severus, but he accepted his loss with grace, taking a bite of his pasta. It was nearly as good as the steak had been, despite being nothing alike.

"This whole restaurant is really good," Harry said, and Severus agreed.

They resumed their conversation as they ate, despite Severus being the one doing most of the talking. Harry was busy looking at his lips, which did not move unless it was to chew, or accept another bite of food. It was convenient Severus could talk with his Vocal Cube despite eating. Occasionally Severus would gesture with his fork, but he always stopped the minute he became aware of himself.

It was also interesting how Severus could become immersed in his task, sometimes not raising his eyes from what he was doing, but still continuing the conversation effortlessly.

Harry was glad just observing. He had time to eat his own meal in peace, with the occasional comment in between, while Severus told him more facts about foods, how he had discovered this restaurant, and how he wanted to try foods from different countries. Severus mentioned how he had once been traveling, during his time before teaching, and how he had always been interested in the local cuisine. Especially the more unorthodox foods.

Harry himself had never eaten anything more questionable than Hogwarts meals, the Dursleys' leftovers, foul potions, and Molly's cooking. As well as the rare and far-between diner visits he'd had.

Severus seemed to think of this as an absolute travesty and swore that they should at least buy cookbooks about food in foreign countries. That way they could try new flavors and experience new things despite being unable to travel too far, or for too long.

"You are just saying that to make me cook you more meals," Harry accused with a wide smile. The food had filled him up, and he was feeling relaxed and comfortable. Severus seemed much the same, but it might be the wine doing it for him.

He held the glass in the cup of his palm while he used his other hand to gesture as the cube narrated for him. "Absolutely. Since it seems you are able, and apparently also willing, it would be an insult to every Slytherin out there to not at least try."

Harry snorted. "Well, it's not too bad an idea. I would like to travel, but I'm not sure if I would want to do it alone. Translation Charms only help you so far, especially when you're lost in a muggle neighborhood. I would still like to experience other cultures, though, so maybe we could even make it into a tradition of sorts; say, every other weekend. You would have to dig up some info about a country and what recipes they have, and I could try to work off of it. Although I do admit, I'm not the best at following a recipe, I mostly just toss in whatever I have at hand."

"You must be good at improvising if you can work on intuition and still manage such well-balanced, delicious meals."

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. I'm not that good at cooking. But shouldn't you be good at cooking as well? One would think so, since you are so great at potions. Aren't the two similar?"

Severus scoffed, but the fond smile he had didn't falter for a second. "Says the brat unable to brew to save his life. I'm good at precision work: chopping, dicing, following the instructions to a fault. With potions, I know or can deduce the possible reaction of each ingredient, so I can adjust accordingly. You can achieve near limitless things with potions, and I love the freedom of it. Next to that, cooking will always seem bland and tame. After a long day stabilizing a volatile potion, cooking pasta seems absolutely redundant. Even if you ruin it, it's still half edible. I can do it; I just lack the motivation."

It made sense. It wasn't like Severus was bad at cooking at all — the lasagna he had made had been wonderful. He was willing enough to do it, but he just didn't want to line up for the task. "Well, it's good then that I have you for my potions needs, and you have me to feed you."

"That it sure is."

The waitress then arrived with their desserts and took their empty plates away. This time Severus had not bothered to rearrange his position or pull back his legs. He had finally relaxed, and had his legs straightened under the table, with his ankle touching Harry's slightly.

"I'm already full but this looks too good," Harry said, brushing Severus's leg in his excitement. He grabbed his spoon and immediately started tucking in. "Wow, that's really sweet." He wasn't too big on overly sweet treats, but since it was only a small serving, he was sure he would manage. The caramel on top of the pudding was crystallized and crunched between his teeth. It was a lot more sugary than he had expected it to be.

Severus huffed what could pass for a laugh on his books as he dug into his pie. They both finished their desserts in peace, and afterwards Severus paid as he had sworn to do. Harry had almost hoped he had forgotten about it.

"How about we redecorate tomorrow? I'm feeling too good to start moving furniture or figuring out baby things today," Harry mused as Severus steered him outside. It was chilly outside, since the sun had set while they were out dining. Harry glanced at the time on his wristwatch and was surprised that they had spent hours just talking and eating.

"It's not as though we have a deadline," Severus acquiesced, subtly casting a Warming Charm over the both of them. Neither of them had expected to stay so long, so they had worn their lighter jackets.

"Good. I just want to get home and sink into my spot on the sofa, and let you finish that thing you had about a client." Harry let the end hang open since he had forgot most of the details, but going by Severus' reaction, the whole spiel was clearly fresh in his memory.

Severus did not need much to start on his rant. Some customer had tried to get him to brew him a highly regulated potion with nearly no payoff in return. The gall that imbecile had to think that Severus Snape could not run a proper potions supply without having their name to hang to.

The conversation continued all the way home. Severus was too caught up to notice Harry walking close enough to brush their shoulders. When he pulled Harry close in order to Apparate, he did not

let go until they were at the door.

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"Harry, are you listening to me?" Hermione said, her hands pressed against her hips in frustration.

Harry snapped back to the present. It wasn't the first time he'd got lost in his thoughts. "Yes. Sorry. Something about your courses."

"About the professor, Harry. We already got past that." She sighed and sat down. It was a rare day that they had alone in the Burrow. Molly and Arthur were visiting relatives, and Ron's Auror class wouldn't end for another hour or so. "What's on your mind? Did you and Severus have a disagreement?"

"No, nothing like that. Everything's just fine. Please continue, you were saying something." He ought to pay attention. Hermione had been very busy lately, and it was almost Halloween. She already had her flight tickets to Australia booked.

"It's not like you are paying much attention anyway, and I have been talking for a while now. It's your turn," she assured him.

He followed the age-old grooves on the Weasleys' kitchen table with his fingers. "It's just me being weird." It was all about Harry's crush being all over the place. Severus was just... Well, maybe not nice. He was still snarky when the mood struck him, but Harry couldn't resist him regardless. He even liked Severus' laugh, once he had learned to tell what it looked like. Severus quirked his lips, cocked his head backwards, and let out an endearing huff of air. But Harry had no idea what to do about any of this. Sometimes he tried to toe the line a little, but he didn't dare to make it obvious. He actually valued Severus's company and didn't want to make him uncomfortable. There was always the chance Severus didn't even like him like that, and would want to move out if he found out. Harry didn't dare to risk it.

Severus was visiting the Malfoys for the first time since he got freed. The Vocal Cube had given him the extra confidence to visit them without having to reveal his weakened state. Severus had said they had some catching up to do, so he would come back in the evening. Harry wanted to tag along, but he hadn't asked to. He knew Severus needed friends of his own without Harry trying to butt in, and Severus would have invited him if he wanted Harry along. But Harry was curious, and he wanted to be there despite what logic told him.

He had tried waiting, but he grew too anxious, so he had gone over to the Weasleys'. Ron, Hermione and he were supposed to go for drinks after to celebrate Ron's successful start in training. They could only have one proper pint and a good meal, since both Ron and Hermione had places to be in the morning.

Hermione almost startled Harry when she pulled on his hands to remove them from his hair. Harry hadn't even noticed he had once again started idly fixing it. She smiled at him reassuringly and stroked her thumb over his knuckles before letting go.

"I think I have a crush," Harry spat out in an exhale. Hermione would understand; she was supposed to be the brains in their trio. She always said Ron had the emotional range of a teaspoon, so clearly, she would have some knowledge in this, just as she did in all subjects. "No, I mean, I know I have a— whatever. I don't know what to do."

"Really?" Hermione raised her brows. "To be honest, I'm not all that surprised, but somehow you admitting it still caught me off guard." She sounded almost astounded with herself.

"What do you mean you're not surprised? Do you even know who it is?" How could Hermione have figured it out already, when he had only just realized? He hadn't been that obvious, surely. They didn't even get to see face to face that often. With university keeping her at irregular hours, their conversations were limited to owls and weekend meetings.

"It's Severus," Hermione said certainly. "Who else could it be? Who else do you even spent time with, except the Weasleys and me? Every owl I get is 'Severus this,' 'Did you know Severus does that?' 'Severus told me,' and 'I'll write to you later, I need to get back to Severus'."

Harry buried his face in his hands.

"Harry, I told you it would get personal. I honestly did not expect this level of personal, but you did invest yourself, so I hope you are enjoying the fruits of your labor." She teased with a smile, before clearing her throat to calm herself. She was nice like that. She knew when to drop her teasing. "So, what's the matter?"

She did not seem at all disapproving, only like the concerned friend she was. After all, these were Harry's feelings on the line.

Harry massaged his temples while he gathered his thoughts. "I don't even know. He's surprisingly nice to be around? He knows a lot of things, and he helps me loads with planning Teddy's room, and he's really supportive about everything. He's interesting... I don't know. I like him, but he's also old" — Harry didn't feel like that was appropriate — "er, and I'm just a wet behind the ears Gryffindor. He has all these adult responsibilities and I don't even have a job yet. Why would he ever like me? Oh god," he groaned, "why do I have to have a crush on him? This is so awkward — what if I do something and he moves out because I'm making him uncomfortable?"

"Woah, woah, slow down. Breathe." Hermione laid a hand on Harry's shoulder before he could work himself into a frenzy.

"He's just so mature. All refined, and cool, and full of these deep conversations — and he actually talks about politics, Hermione. What could he possibly see in me? I actually tried to reach to get a book for him. Me. I'm shorter than you." Hermione's reminder to breath hadn't helped.

Hermione politely covered her mouth, but the look in her eyes let slip that she was muffling her laughter. "We are the same height."

"It doesn't matter! I only reach his shoulder!"

Hermione burst into giggles. "Oh, Harry."

And there it was. Those legendary two words. At least Severus did not "Oh, Harry" him.

"Surely it can't be that bad. I have never known Severus to just endure idiocy. If he hasn't called you out yet, I think you have some hope left."

"Thanks for admitting that you think I'm behaving like an idiot," Harry grumbled, despite feeling elated at her words. He could grasp onto any sliver of hope by this point.

"It's all about courage, Harry." As if he didn't know that already.

"Yeah, but if I misjudge this, he's going to skin me alive and use it for a potion to magically enhance the restraining order he's going to file."

"You know, skin would actually work as an ingredient. It's a bit unorthodox, since any sample of

the intended's DNA would do."

"I know. Severus taught me."

"He actually teaches you Potions now?" Hermione gasped in shock.

"No, just how to pick-up ingredients and stuff. The restraining order thing was for a client." Harry said, as if it was of great importance to clear it up.

"Oh god," Hermione said. "Well if he ever does, then that is true love. Only someone who truly cares for you would bother."

"Hey! I got an E in Potions!" He pointed at her.

"We are talking about Severus here," she reminded Harry, brushing his hand aside, a rude habit that it was. Severus only accepted those with O's into his NEWT class. He would never take someone with less than that into the personal lab where he worked for clients.

"At least he lets me in his lab," Harry said sulkily. "Not for long, mind, but I bring him lunch, and sometimes I stay to talk for a little while."

"That is something," Hermione said. "Have you tried anything? Like, even the more subtle things? Like casual touches, flirting, compliments?" She listed with her fingers.

"Not on purpose, but I guess I have." Harry was about to say more, but Hermione interrupted him with an insistent:

"Well? How did he react? Did he pull back? Turn away? Change the topic?"

"No. But I don't really know if he did anything out of the ordinary, either. He always touched my wrist a lot to thank me when he couldn't say it. So, maybe he's just used to me." Hermione reached under the table and squeezed Harry's knee before he could get any further. Harry immediately jolted his leg away in surprise.

"What was that for!?" Harry pushed himself further back into his chair.

"You don't get used to these things, Harry, that's the whole point. You let them do it because you want them to!" Hermione hissed. Harry held back from saying that he had only twitched because Hermione had squeezed his knee too hard. He knew she had a point, and she had to prove it someday.

"Fine! But I'll wait for a clear signal before I do anything. I really don't want to mess this up."

"Harry, you said it yourself: he's older than you, and you are only 18. How clear do you think he dares to get?" Yet one more point to her. "If you wait too long, he's just going to think you are not interested, or maybe just not ready for a relationship."

Harry sighed. She was right. Severus was what — twice his age? So, if he did anything too forward, it would only seem creepy coming from him. But Harry didn't want to make the first move; he wanted to know for sure there was some positive response.

"I get it. Just, let me steel my nerves first. Or something." He wanted Severus, wanted him more than he thought possible, but he was also deadly afraid of rejection. "Thanks for taking this so well."

"Which part? That he's your previously most hated professor, or that he's a guy?" Hermione asked with a small, calm smile.

"Both? I didn't much think about the gender, but it is odd, isn't it?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"Not really. You fall in love with people, not with their genitals. And you were awfully invested in helping him. It doesn't really come as a shock." Hermione shrugged. "You were excessively obsessed with Malfoy back in sixth year, so I did suspect it then. I don't think you were that invested in it, though. You might have just thought he looked attractive, or something, and didn't know what to do about it."

"I did not think Draco as attractive back then! He was up to something, you know it!"

"Oh, please," she rolled her eyes. "No-one's that interested in some schoolyard bully. You were stalking him!"

"Was not! He was acting weird! I was concerned!"

"No. I won't start a childish squabble with you over this." Hermione sighed. "I'm just saying. I thought about it back then, but obviously that wasn't the case. It still doesn't surprise me, though. You were always awkward around girls. You never talked about how amazing either Ginny or Cho were, you didn't go on tangents about what they were doing, or what their dreams were. You didn't find out anything about them. You didn't sneak stray touches. And your eyes didn't slowly drift to their cleavage. You always just looked at them and thought, 'Wow, pretty,' instead of, you know." She shrugged. "You were attracted, just not... interested. Do you get what I'm saying? Sometimes people are just that pretty, that you can't look away. So you think how nice it would be to be together, but you never really take it further than that? It sounded like that with Cho and Ginny."

He could get that. He had noticed his eyes straying sometimes, but he hadn't thought there was anything more to it. He didn't question Cedric's dimples; how wide and warm his smile was; how strong and capable he looked; or how he truly appreciated Cedric's support. He didn't even doubt that Draco was attractive, with his swimmer's build and hair so soft Harry almost wanted to touch it. Not that anyone would get Harry to admit that. Sometimes his eyes strayed in the Quidditch locker room, but he always thought it was just in appreciation. Any reaction he had, he put down to post-workout adrenaline. It was consistent enough that he didn't even see the connection between the two.

Hermione continued. "I'm not saying you are gay; you might just like both. It doesn't matter. People are people, and that's fine."

Harry smiled shyly at her and held out his arms. Hermione instantly moved in to hug him. Harry didn't even mind her frizzy hair getting all over his face, because he was glad that Hermione was so understanding. She didn't insist on anything, she didn't label him, and she didn't judge. She just accepted it and listened, which was enough. He welled up, but sniffed to keep the tears at bay.

"Hey! What are you doing hugging my girlfriend?" Ron said from the door, making the two pull apart. When Harry got a good look at him, still in Auror trainee gear and covered in mud, he also noticed Ron's dubious smile. He wasn't jumping to conclusions this time.

Hermione grinned at Harry, before shrugging her head towards Ron.

Harry instantly blushed and pressed his fingers against his eyes. Ron was his best friend; he should find the confidence to tell him. He felt like it was too soon, since nothing was confirmed yet, but Ron would hate it if he only found out after. It didn't help that Harry was nervous about Ron

repeating the forest incident.

The words came to him reluctantly. "Hermione has been helping me with some things," Harry started, keeping his eyes firmly on the floor. "Um, you know, feelings?"

"You like someone?" Ron asked, sounding surprised, but looking a touch wary as well.

"Oh, erm. Yeah?" It was too early for Harry to say whom he liked. He didn't want to get used to the idea until he knew it was going somewhere.

"Do I know her?" Ron asked, and Harry shuffled on his spot.

"Erm. Yeah. But that's not important. I haven't really, um, asked them out yet, or anything like that," Harry stammered. He felt Hermione pull his sleeve in support. "I-it... I... I might like... a guy, but — oh god — please don't hate me." Harry looked at Ron in trepidation.

"It's not me, right?"

"No."

"Malfoy?"

"Hell, no."

"Oh, thank Merlin. I was really worried for a second." Ron laughed in relief. "Whoo — for a second there I thought this was going to be something really bad, but thank goodness."

"You don't care? But what if I'm gay — what about Ginny?"

"Oh, who cares. Just be happy, you sorry sod. Ginny's has been owling with Dean back and forth for a while now; I think they want to meet on her Yule break." He enveloped Harry in a hug that was no less than any other hug he'd given. Ron was still tall, towering over Harry as he held him to his side. He ended the hug with a firm pat on Harry's back. "Just let me change my gear, and then let's go have a pint. You can catch me up once I get some food in me. I'm absolutely famished."

Ron climbed upstairs, and Harry was left staring at his own clothes. Ron had managed to cover Harry in approximately half of the mud and dirt he'd brought in.

Hermione giggled into her sleeve. "Love hurts," she said without deliberating, as she cast a Cleaning Charm on Harry.

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Harry arrived home later than he had anticipated. They had stuck with their one-pint limit, but the conversation had grown long, since Ron had insisted Harry tell him who he was crushing on. Harry refused to say anything, but it still meant all their catching up was delayed, and Ron was absolutely full of Auror training stories.

He was still elated when he got home, and was surprised that Severus had returned before him.

Severus's shoes were in a neat line as usual, whereas Harry kicked his own off haphazardly. "I'm back!" Harry announced, and peeked into the drawing room in search for Severus.

Severus looked up and set his book down. His brows were angled in a question, and he held his palm flat before gesturing to Harry. His Vocal Cube was not with him.

"I was having a pint and a meal with Ron and Hermione. Ron had loads of stories from training, so it drew a little late." Harry grinned as he took his usual seat. "Where is your cube? I don't mind that it's not here, I just want to know that it isn't lost or broken."

Severus waved his hand dismissively and pointed vaguely upstairs. He probably had it up in his room. Severus's hair was still a little wet, and since it wasn't raining, he must have taken a shower. The water in his hair was making it lie flatter than usual.

"How was your visit? Did everything go okay?" Harry asked as he leaned his elbows against his knees.

Severus nodded.

"Was Narcissa happy with the company?"

Severus rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and nodded. He pursed his lips in annoyance before making a yapping motion with his hand.

"Sounds about the same as when I last visited. Draco said her usual tea guests have been unavailable, and she needs to host something to fend off the cabin fever. Thanks for taking one for the team." Harry would have tried for a fist bump, but he knew for certain that Severus would not humor him.

Severus glared at Harry, as if blaming him for not giving him a fair warning in advance. Narcissa was a good woman, but house arrest would become boring for anyone, no matter how big the manor they were stuck in.

Harry lifted his hands in surrender. "Have you been home for long? Are you hungry?"

Severus shook his head and glanced at his watch before making a vague motion, which meant he must not have arrived too long ago.

Severus lifted up one finger, in silent command for Harry to wait, before he searched for the latest newspaper. When he found it, he pointed to the date, before searching for a specific page before handing it over. Severus got up to stand behind Harry as he pointed to the article he meant to show.

It was some astronomy article. Harry had barely scraped by the course, so he wasn't absolutely certain what the big deal was, exactly, but he knew it was happening today.

"What's happening? A meteor shower? Some other significant thing?"

Severus pulled the newspaper from Harry's arms and whacked him on the head with it, before searching for a book from the shelf. It took him only a short moment to locate the right tome, and he flicked through to find the correct page. He slammed it on the coffee table and pointed furiously at the page.

Oh, of course. Stupid him, assuming he would know when some relatively rare conditions are fulfilled for some random flower to bloom.

"Is it a potion ingredient?" Harry guessed. If Severus was any less disciplined, he would have gaped at Harry's dim wit.

Severus looked ready to boil over. He pressed his temples, breathing in and holding it for a few seconds, before he exhaled slowly. He then pointed out phrases from the book: *only blooms when Venus is brightest; happens roughly every one-and-a-half years, if the season has been optimal for*

the plant; can only be harvested for a short window of time. Known locations.

"I'm guessing you are going to harvest it," Harry stated, feeling a little disappointed that Severus would be leaving so soon. It surprised him when Severus shook Harry's shoulder firmly.

He pointed at Harry, then himself, and repeated the motion a few times. Next, he pointed at both his eyes, then to the floor, as if he was searching for something.

Oh — Oh! He wanted Harry to help him look! It was hard to find, even if they roughly knew where it should be appearing.

"Yes!" Harry agreed, excited, and immediately got up on his feet. "I'll help! I'll send you a Patronus once I find it. I'll try to be really careful when harvesting it."

Severus glared, and pointed his finger at him in a clear threat: fuck this up and suffer.

For once, Harry was glad for his decent grade in Herbology, and the innumerable hours spent in the Dursleys' garden. "Don't worry. I'll help you find it. I promise."

Severus nodded, slow and unsure. But it was clear he needed the help, or else he would not have bothered asking.

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Severus had not bothered with the Vocal Cube. He brought it with him in case he needed it, but since they would be separating, he had stored it in his robes after instructing Harry carefully on how to locate and harvest the plant. He pressed the importance that Harry not try to harvest the plant himself until Severus got there, or unless their time window was closing. He wanted to be certain Harry knew exactly how to harvest it. Since this ingredient was rare, it was a shame to waste it when one couldn't harvest all of it. The ingredient frequently ran out of stock at apothecary supplies, and it was used in many advanced potions, so the importance of having personal stock was vital.

Severus was the one to Apparate them to the edge of the forest. From what Harry had understood, the flowers only grew in forests, but they had to find a clearing where Venus could be seen. Any shade would interrupt their blooming. There were a lot of specifics for the plant to bloom, most of which Harry had tuned out unless it was relevant to actually locating the plant.

Traipsing about in a forest wasn't exactly the way he had planned to spend this Saturday night. But he couldn't deny Severus anything if the man actually found it in himself to ask. He was pumped up and ready to go. He wanted to find the plant, he couldn't wait to present it to Severus. He was bursting with joy that Severus had chosen to ask for his help, instead of Malfoy, or anyone else.

They weren't expecting any problems. The full moon wouldn't be for another two weeks, and the forest was relatively peaceful. It was dreadfully cold though, and Severus had already expressed his worries of it being too cold for the flowers to bloom.

The moss was moist, and nearly frosting. Harry was shivering in his coat, and despite his thick boots, he could feel his socks getting wet. He sniffled often as he searched, eyes trained on the ground as he inspected every single batch of vegetation for the rumored plant. Severus had instructed him to pay attention to the stalk and leaves, because the buds were easy to miss, and you couldn't count on the flowers being in full bloom yet.

Mostly, it was boring and lonely. He wished they could have stayed together, if for nothing other than for conversation to pass the time. Harry had been searching for hours, and he didn't even

know for certain how deep he had wandered already. He knew he could use a Four-Point Spell to find his way out, but searching for a rare plant was like finding a needle in a haystack.

He racked his brain for any spell that would help him. He knew the plants grew in a clearing, but he didn't remember any spells to help him find one.

And then it hit him. If one wanted to find a clearing in the woods, it would be easiest from above. If he had his broom, he could fly above and find the clearing. Sadly, they were too far from the house for Harry to just *Accio* his broom.

But Kreacher held no such restrictions.

The house-elf had been incredibly disgruntled to be summoned to the middle of a forest just to be used as an errand boy. But he had done it, grumbling the whole time.

The bird's-eye view truly made everything much easier. Severus would not have thought of this way of searching, since he didn't like flying. Harry felt extremely lucky with his chances.

For every clearing, no matter how big or how small, he landed close by to walk the last distance and check the area. Even on broom, it had taken him ages to scout the area, but finally he found it. It was a relatively small clearing. Maybe the size of the drawing room at Grimmauld, if not smaller.

The flowers were just starting to bloom, only slight openings to be seen on the buds, but the very distinctive glow gave them away.

Harry cast his Patronus immediately. He took a seat on a small rock, half covered in moss, and waited. He set his set of harvesting tools on the mossy part of the rock. If Severus did not reach here in time, he would start without him.

Harry watched the starting bloom in rapt attention. There were several flowers. Only a handful had started blooming, but every now and then more would follow. It seemed like there was a good patch of them yet. The process took a long time, and when the first flower was in full bloom, Harry could hear heavy footsteps approaching.

"Severus!" Harry yelled, standing up. He couldn't see him yet, but he knew it was he by instinct. "The first one just bloomed! The others are almost done!"

He could hear the footsteps getting faster, accompanied by crackling branches and rustling leaves.

Harry turned around to look at the flowers, and gasped. Several more were finally blooming, and the blue glow they gave had Harry spellbound. The petals were rounded, and inside there were thick white stamens. The stalks were green, and the leaves were tipped with yellow. The flowers seemed absolutely delighted to be finally embraced with the light of Venus, which was almost as bright as the moon and the sun. The gentle wind almost made the flowers appear to dance.

Harry heard a noise behind him, and turned to see Severus, mouth open and stunned for a second. The Patronus bowed its head and dissolved, leaving Severus and Harry alone with the flowers. Severus finally snapped to the present and ran over. He squeezed Harry's shoulder in thanks, before searching his pockets for his harvesting tools with shaky hands.

Harry took that as his cue to follow. He watched carefully as Severus showed him how to harvest each usable part of the flower and followed suit. Together, they managed to harvest several jars' worth of ingredients, and even Harry was sure it would be enough for Severus to last until the next cycle.

Neither of them had spoken at all, but once the last remaining buds started to close, Severus turned to him.

He made a motion to gesture at Harry, before looking around himself, and gesturing to the clearing around them in confusion.

"Oh! I asked Kreacher to bring my broom. It's easier to find a clearing from above," Harry explained, as he got his broom and held it aloft like a trophy.

Severus rolled his eyes, but he smiled fondly. "Only you." It seemed to say. Harry couldn't help but grin from ear to ear.

"Want to head back?" Harry asked as he packed up his tools. Severus nodded, while he carefully pocketed all the jars they had filled.

Severus held his hand out for Harry, and Apparated them away from the clearing.

They arrived at the park near Grimmauld Place and walked the rest of the way. Severus was examining one jar with rapt interest, and Harry couldn't help but observe him in return. Severus seemed truly happy: smiling without being aware of it as he turned the jar in his hands, probably calculating its value.

"I can't wait to get home. It was really cold out there," Harry mumbled, and adjusted the dragon hide harvesting gloves.

Severus looked up and cast a Warming Charm over Harry. Harry felt stupid for always forgetting about Warming Charms. Severus replaced the jar in his pocket, and then laid his free hand on the small of Harry's back.

Harry could feel the gentle pressure guiding him to a faster gait, determined to lead him back to warmth. He couldn't believe how fast a healthy blush could warm his insides.

Grimmauld was fast approaching. Harry wholeheartedly wished it was on the other side of the country when Severus pulled him closer to his chest.

Severus opened the door and ushered Harry inside. The hand let go of his back, and Harry sighed in disappointment. He liked these things about Severus. If the man was feeling generous, he would hold his hand at the small of Harry's back. The physical touches came surprisingly easy to him. If he needed to make sure Harry would keep up, there was a hand on his back guiding him. He held out his arm when he didn't want Harry to stray too far, and he held the doors open for him if Harry's hands were full.

It was always disappointing to return back home after that.

"I'll go take a warm shower," Harry mumbled once he had shed his coat and shoes. He was already heading for the stairs when Severus held him back.

Severus was patting his pockets, frantically searching for his Vocal Cube. He sneered as he failed to find it fast enough. He had probably put it in the same pocket as the numerous jars.

Severus huffed as he chose to proceed without it instead. He stepped closer and stood straight as he encompassed Harry's hand with both of his.

Harry recognized the gesture as a thank you. He opened his mouth to respond, but the words were stuck in his throat. Severus was looking at him so intently, Harry's hand held close to his chest.

Severus' fingers were warm against Harry's freezing digits, and Harry had no desire to ask for his hand back.

Severus did not blink as he looked imploringly at Harry. One of Severus's hands brushed slowly down Harry's hand, while the other grasped around Harry's fingers, pulling the arm closer.

Harry swallowed thickly as he saw Severus bow. He felt Severus' breath against his hand and it sent goosebumps up his arm. Severus did not break eye contact as he gently kissed Harry's palm. It was just a soft brush of lips, but Harry could feel the slight moistness left behind.

Oh. Oh! Harry gasped. Suddenly his brain kick-started. Severus kissed his hand. If this wasn't a sign, then nothing was. He gasped again as he used his reflexes to grasp tightly to the hand holding his. Be brave, he thought to himself as he yanked Severus down; refused to think about it or regret anything, as he pulled Severus into a deep kiss.

He felt as if he could devour Severus' lips as he kissed him roughly, all-consumingly. He gasped as he felt Severus' hands against his cheeks. He was afraid to be pushed away, and thus was not ready for it when Severus tilted his head, and kissed him back, stealing the breath from his lungs.

Chapter Six

Harry wrapped his arms around Severus' neck, pulling him down so they could be closer, and got up on his tiptoes to return the kiss with fervor. Severus' lips were thin and insistent, and when he deepened the kiss Harry welcomed it with ardor. He didn't even notice that Severus was pushing him until his back hit the wall. One of Severus' hands was on his cheek, the other working its way around his back, holding him tight.

The whole experience was overwhelming, but he wanted to feel Severus with his entire body. So when Severus turned his head and manhandled Harry into whatever position he desired, Harry let him willingly. He couldn't resist pushing himself closer to Severus. Neither of them had any finesse or noticeable technique, but there was passion, and Harry wanted to climb Severus like a tree.

Harry's fingers got lost in Severus' hair. The hand that had been on his back was descending over his arse. The press of Severus' fingers lit Harry's skin on fire. He moaned as his hips sought friction. Harry didn't even have to be tempted into lifting his leg, and allowing Severus to pin him against the wall.

Severus' fingers held firm at the base of Harry's neck as he angled into the kiss. Harry closed his eyes and let himself get lost. He could feel Severus' nose brushing his cheek, and teeth biting his lower lip before Severus' tongue soothed it. Harry's hands curled into fists in Severus' hair, and he opened his mouth for more. He moaned as he felt Severus' cock pressing against his stomach.

Nothing was more exciting than feeling Severus hard and insistent against him, and Harry was sure his knees would give out if Severus weren't holding him up. His own cock twitched and pulsed in need, and Harry squirmed as he sought to align himself with Severus.

He hated every single layer of clothing they were wearing. He needed them gone. Needed desperately to feel Severus' skin on his own. His hands started on Severus' buttons and revealed Severus' collar. His hips ground against Severus, and he worried Severus' lip between his teeth.

Severus gasped, momentarily faltering. He pressed Harry's shoulder back into the wall, while he pulled away to gather himself.

Harry wanted to continue his path down, but Severus held Harry's hands firmly on the wall beside his head. Severus panted. From this close, Harry could tell his pupils were blown in lust.

Harry wanted to kiss him again, but Severus held him still. Severus' lips were moving, but no sound came.

"Please," Harry begged, and the small, slow kiss Severus blessed him with was not nearly enough.

Severus glanced upstairs then back at Harry. He took one of his hands and pulled. By this point, Severus could lead Harry anywhere and he would be sure to follow.

Severus led Harry upstairs to his bedroom. The entire way Harry was painfully aware of how fast his heart was thrumming. He could feel his nerves, but he was also painfully excited.

Once inside, Severus let him go, and gestured with his hand, pushing his palm down, and Harry took a seat on the edge of Severus' bed. Severus had redecorated the room to look more personal. It was comfortable with natural tones, and Harry's prayer plant took the prime spot on the windowsill.

Severus walked to a drawer and began unloading his pockets. The top of his drawer was soon filled with more jars than any pocket could hold without the aid of magic.

He then picked up his Vocal Cube, and gently pushed it into the air for it to float to its rightful place beside his head.

"Harry." Even the Cube sounded husky, and it sent shivers down Harry's spine. Severus walked over and sat beside him, but not close enough to touch, which was a shame.

Severus looked uncertain, and Harry wanted to reach over to him for encouragement.

"Are you sure?" Severus asked, and when his hand reached out, Harry didn't hesitate to hold it.

"Yeah." Harry smiled, his heart beating ever faster. "Ever since I gave you that cube, I knew." His ears were probably red, but he refused to be ashamed of it.

Severus swallowed, his fingers making small circles on Harry's wrist under his sleeve. "I was curious before that, but I didn't dare to hope for anything more. You have been surprisingly tolerable to live with, and it wouldn't have been proper to act on any urges."

Harry snorted. It sounded very similar to what Hermione had already guessed. "I lose my courage and sense around you. I probably made an idiot of myself, so a hint was much appreciated."

Severus huffed — it sounded a lot like his laugh. "I noticed. You almost fell into my cauldron when you tried to show off while handing over the ingredient I asked for."

Harry buried his face in his arms and fell over onto his side. "Oh god, can we please agree to never talk about any of that?"

"No. I will bring it up every Weasley family dinner I am forced to attend. An eye for an eye as we speak." Harry peeked from between his fingers.

"You attended a Weasley family dinner just for me."

Severus rolled his eyes. "Who else, brat?"

"I really like you," Harry admitted as he looked up at Severus from his place on the bed.

Severus swallowed. He didn't say it aloud, but he motioned catching something from the air, and holding it to his chest.

Harry smiled at the gesture. Words couldn't express everything. He reached for Severus. "Kiss me again?"

"I still don't understand why you would like me," Severus mumbled, but laid a soft kiss on Harry's lips anyway.

"I can write you an essay about it later. You can even grade it." Harry deepened the kiss. Severus' hair curtained around him, and some of it got between their mouths, so Harry once again found his hands in Severus' hair. It felt a bit greasy, admittedly, but he didn't mind. He didn't mind that Severus' teeth felt crooked under his tongue, either, or that his nose brushed against his cheek. They were all parts which made up Severus, and Harry accepted them. After all, they did come with so many other qualities he truly liked.

Harry's ears were filled with wet smacking sounds, his stomach of butterflies, and his heart with so

many emotions ready to be unleashed.

Kissing didn't seem enough, so he grasped at Severus' shoulder, trying to pull him over.

He almost whined when Severus moved away.

"Have you done this before?"

Harry couldn't help but avert his eyes, but he didn't want to look uncertain, so he took in the features of Severus' face instead. "Not... not with a man. I have only ever been with Ginny, so I don't really know — for sure — what to do." It was a sporadic explanation, but he wasn't used to talking about these things.

"We don't have to go all the way if you are not certain." Severus did look as if he would wait, and Harry knew he could be a gentleman if he wanted, but Harry did not want to wait.

"I want to! I want you." He still couldn't believe he had even made it this far.

"I'll take care of you, and I can explain it if you want," Severus offered.

Harry kissed him in thanks. "I know you will." He pulled Severus over him, and this time Severus followed without a protest. Severus was kneeling above him, one arm on Harry's chest, and the other to hold himself up. He stole several more kisses, which Harry moaned into.

When Severus sat up, Harry propped himself on his elbows. "I want to be with you," Harry admitted. "I want you to stay here. You can help me mind Teddy; I promise to look after him while you brew. We can start a garden, and, when things are ready here, have a housewarming with our friends. We can see how it works out, and we can go to those Potions conferences together."

"Not just mere curiosity, then?" Severus mused as his hand traced down the side of Harry's throat, and over his collar to the top buttons of Harry's flannel shirt.

"No," Harry said. "I just want to know if you want that too. I don't want to just have you once."

"As if anyone would be content with that." Severus popped open the buttons, slowly.

"Please don't be vague." Harry covered Severus' hand with his own, stopping him from continuing while he gazed at him imploringly.

Severus sighed, but he was smiling. "Yes. But we'll take our time and see where it goes."

"Of course." Harry acquiesced. "I wouldn't want anything less." He grinned as he reached up for one more kiss.

He loved how Severus crowded him. Severus was so much taller than he, and covered Harry with the way he leaned over him. Harry couldn't help but hold Severus' face in his hands to hold him closer, kiss him deeper.

Severus' fingers were making a quick job of working open the buttons of Harry's flannel shirt. His knee pressed between Harry's legs, and Harry instinctively made a space for Severus to settle between them. When Severus' fingers reached his belt, Harry angled up his hips to aid him. Harry moved his hands to start with the many buttons on Severus' shirt while Severus worked open his belt.

Severus sat up to pull Harry's jeans to his ankles, with Harry holding his hips up.

"Nervous?" Severus asked, while Harry took off his shirt.

Harry shook his head and grinned boyishly. "Only a bit." He wanted this too much to be stopped by the small nerves he had. He hadn't ever done this before — he only knew the gist of it, but he also knew Severus would not do anything to hurt him on purpose.

Severus' hands went to Harry's stomach, caressing up his front as he gathered the shirt Harry was wearing. Harry let Severus pull it off him, and almost lost his glasses in the process. He laid them down on the night table, feeling a bit odd being naked with only his pants and socks on.

"You too." Harry started with Severus' coat, and pulled it off. Severus got to his many buttons, while Harry went to undo his trousers. His fingers were a bit stiff with nerves, but he kept going. He wanted to see Severus completely naked. He wanted to know what he looked like erect and ready.

He couldn't get Severus' trousers farther than his hips, unless he stood up, so instead his hands went to Severus' pants, feeling the outline of his cock. It was hard and radiated heat. Harry couldn't help trying to wrap his hand around the length as best he could. He could already tell Severus was thicker than he was. It felt different in his hand; heavier, and wider than he was used to. The material over Severus' cock smelt musty and, weird though it felt to admit, Harry wanted to nuzzle his face into it, lick it, and take it in his mouth.

Severus jerked his hips forwards and hurried with his many buttons. The drawback of wearing so many layers.

"I want to blow you," Harry said as he watched Severus undo his cuff links, and finally pull off his shirt.

Severus looked a bit taken by his brashness, but he did not comment on it. He only nodded.

But first, they needed to get rid of Severus' vest and those pesky trousers. Harry helped him with that. The minute the shirt was discarded on the floor, Harry toppled Severus over to lie on the bed. He made a quick job of pulling Severus' trousers off and crawling over him.

First, he went for a kiss. "I haven't done this before," Harry admitted in between kisses, worrying Severus' bottom lip as his fingers ran over the hair on Severus' chest. "So, tell me what you want, or don't particularly like." Harry kissed Severus' jaw, and worked his way down. He kissed the heavy scars on Severus' throat, and sucked gently on his shoulder.

He marked a path with his hands and trailed it with kisses. He loved how Severus' muscles tensed under his hands, and how his hips tried to seek more pressure. He trailed his lips over Severus' stomach, and then his fingers found the waistband of Severus' pants, finally dipping beneath the band, and revealing more skin. It was unbelievable how hot the path of hair that ran from Severus' chest down to his coarse pubes was.

Severus bucked his hips, and Harry pried his fingers under the waistband, pulling the material down to Severus' knees.

Severus' cock immediately bounced to rest over his stomach, heavy and thick, and pulsing with need. Harry swallowed audibly. It was thicker than Harry's. It was about the same length as he was, but in contrast it seemed huge.

Harry pulled Severus' pants and socks completely off, then settled on his front between Severus' legs and decided to get acquainted.

Severus' hand came to rest on his shoulder, before making its way to grasp the soft hairs at the base of his neck. He wasn't insisting Harry hurry up, he just made calming, massage like motions to reassure Harry that he was doing fine.

It was the encouragement Harry needed in order to finally do what he had wanted for so long. He nuzzled Severus' cock with the bridge of his nose, before licking his way up from the base. He could faintly smell the musk, and the heady scent was nothing but exciting at this point. Severus tasted only slightly salty, even when Harry gathered Severus' cock in his fist and kissed its sides.

He couldn't resist tugging the foreskin with his lips before pulling it down with his hand, revealing the dark red tip, rounded and moist with precum. He puffed warm air over Severus' cock, almost moaning at the thought of getting to devour it alone. He loved how Severus twitched beneath him, desperate for Harry's touch.

Harry mouthed along the shaft one more time, salivating already, before closing his lips around the length. He moaned. Severus tasted slightly bitter, but a lot saltier than just kissing his skin had foretold. He loved it. He hummed in appreciation as he sank lower, going slow to find out his limits.

Severus fingers immediately sought to grasp Harry's hair, holding tighter, squeezing just enough to give the perfect tingle without hurting his scalp.

Harry glanced up and ground his hips against the bed in sheer excitement. Severus' pupils were blown with lust, and his lips slightly parted. He observed Harry as if he was the hottest sight he had ever witnessed, and Harry couldn't help but try to match his expectations, if not best them.

Severus looked so good like this. Harry had fantasized about this, but each fantasy paled in comparison to the real thing.

He closed his eyes and got himself lost on sucking Severus' cock. He found out how much he could take and covered the rest of the length with his fist. He was proud of touching his lips to his balled-up fist on each plunge down. He could feel Severus' pulse under his fingers, and he squeezed to the rhythm. When he reached the tip, he circled his tongue around the head, and gave it a kiss, before returning to suck Severus' cock again.

Severus showed him the pace he liked by releasing the pressure on Harry's head on the retreat, and gently laying his hand on him on the way down. Once Harry got the rhythm of it, Severus got more comfortable with holding a bit tighter, and thrusting up to Harry's movements.

At first Harry felt self-conscious about slurping when air sneaked through the gap between his lips, but he soon learned to cherish the sounds involved with it. Not just the sounds he made, but also Severus' elevated breath, his small gasps and groans, and the sharp inhale through his nose when he was particularly close. All those sounds which no Vocal Cube could ever replicate.

They emboldened Harry. He was hard in his pants, sticky with precum. He writhed, trying to correct his position in search of friction. He spread out his elbows, one hand on Severus' stomach, the other around his cock as he ground against the mattress. He moaned around Severus' leaking length, immediately lapping it all up, and salivating at the taste.

He felt Severus' hand in his hair pull his head up, and he saw Severus gazing at him intently. Harry was sure his own eyes must barely have any emerald to be seen as he held his mouth wide open, and drooled around Severus' cock.

Harry felt more than saw Severus' cock twitch in his mouth, demanding attention. He pressed it

against his palate, licking it and gathering up the taste, before sucking the rest of it off, and finishing with a kiss to his tip.

Severus groaned loudly as he pressed Harry back down, and Harry flattened his palm against Severus' pubic bone to take him to the root. He didn't quite manage, but he got close. His throat was so relaxed by now, he was sure he could make it if he tried. He sank down again, and felt the coarse hair tickle his nose, before Severus pulled him back.

Faster than Harry knew to process, Severus rolled them over, and manhandled him to lie where he had just been. Harry's legs immediately sought to lock around Severus' hips as Severus breached his lips with his tongue, swapping spit and tasting just how close Harry had brought him to completion. Harry's hands locked behind Severus' nape. He whimpered into the kiss as Severus ground against him.

Harry wanted his pants off. He wanted to feel Severus' cock against his own. He squirmed, maneuvering so that he could push them down.

"*Harry.*" Severus' voice was hoarse. It sounded even better than his drawl back in class: deep, husky, and absolutely sultry.

"Mm." Harry wasn't quite there to offer him whole sentences, or even words, in return. He was needy, and he wanted.

Severus seemed to understand, as he pulled off Harry's pants. Harry did his best to aid him, lifting his hips enthusiastically.

"I need to prepare you if I want to last through this entire round," Severus said.

Harry dug his fingers in the duvet to ground himself. "Please," he gasped. He was already so rared up to go, he wasn't sure how long he could hold off, either. He wanted it so much. He wasn't even sure what he wanted — more friction, more touching, more closeness. Anything, if it meant he could have more pleasure to tip him over the edge.

"Mm, you sound so good when you ask nicely," Severus murmured against his collarbone, kissing a path to his shoulder, before biting down. Harry moaned and bucked up. Even the pain felt so good, more like a pleasant tingle.

"It might feel uncomfortable at first, so try to stay relaxed. If it feels too tight, try to bear down. The pushing motion should help." Severus kissed further down, pausing to tug at Harry's nipple with his teeth. Harry leant into the sensation. "I will do my best to distract you from any pain, but tell me if it gets too much."

Harry choked out an acknowledgment — which was more a whimper than anything, with Severus toying with his nipples like that.

Harry shivered as Severus' hands stroked down his sides, his legs, and back up, over his hips, until he gathered Harry's dick in his hands.

"Yes," Harry hissed, the last letter lingering on his lips as he pulled his knee up. There was no room in his head for doubts, only desire.

Severus leaned over to the headboard, rummaging in the beside table drawer for a phial of lube Harry suspected he may have made himself. Somewhere far away, in the last coherent part of Harry's brain, he found the thought of Severus making lube in the laboratory in Grimmauld Place's basement — with the full intention to use it — incredibly hot.

"Are you sure? This is the last moment to withdraw," Severus asked.

Harry felt he could explode. "Yes," he said. "Yes, yes, yes. I'm sure. Please — I really want it." Harry stretched his legs further apart, hoping it was good enough to convey that he knew just what was about to happen.

"Good." Severus was back to abusing Harry's nipples. It distracted Harry from the pop of the lube's stopper being uncorked, as Severus coated his fingers.

Severus kissed his way down Harry's body. His slight stubble scratched Harry's skin, feeling both ticklish and pleasant in a whole new way. Harry raised himself on his elbows to watch as Severus made himself comfortable between Harry's legs.

"You look beautiful like this." Severus' voice was deep and smooth, and Harry had to resist the urge to hide himself. He had never been the most confident in his own looks, but he was elated to think Severus found him attractive.

He tensed reflexively as Severus' fingers brushed against his hole, but made himself relax. The lube was slightly cold, and very slick — an alien feeling so low between his legs. Harry familiarized himself with the sensation as Severus circled his hole, until Harry finally was able to relax into it.

"Don't think about it," Severus said, as he started moving his other hand on Harry's cock, bringing a surprised gasp to Harry's lips. "Concentrate on this."

It was the only warning Harry got before Severus kissed his shaft. Harry's elbows gave in, and he fell flat on the bed with a gasp.

He had gotten a blowjob before, but this was different. Severus was confident. He knew exactly how firm to hold him, and how hard to suck him. He wasn't heedlessly cautious. It was enough to distract Harry from Severus' nudging finger, and he barely noticed when the tip had found its way inside Harry.

He didn't have time to concentrate on it, when he could be focusing on Severus' sinful mouth instead. Severus held Harry's cock steady between his thumb and pointer, his palm flat on Harry's hip as he easily sucked him, going farther down than Harry had dared to go on his first try.

"Severus," Harry moaned when he felt Severus' tongue toy with his foreskin, trying to push into the gap. Severus' tongue was magic in itself, and Harry whimpered as it dipped to tongue over the slit. Harry didn't even register that Severus had his whole finger inside him now — down to the knuckle — until Severus pulled it out.

Severus kissed the tip of Harry's cock, and descended down, bringing the foreskin with him, and holding it down with his hand. He started sucking, and Harry bucked into it. He wanted the friction so bad. His fingers were already tangling in Severus' hair, before he remembered to contain himself.

"Please—" Harry gasped, as Severus found his rhythm. This time, Harry was aware of the two fingers inside him and the slight burn they left behind. It wasn't enough to distract him, though. Not when Severus was finally sucking him down so perfectly.

"Oh my god," Harry moaned, his grip on Severus' hair tightening, his hips stuttering against the sheets as he tried to hold back from thrusting. "Please. More."

Harry whimpered as Severus' fingers twisted inside him. It wasn't exactly what Harry had meant,

but then Severus moaned around him, and Harry forgot all about it. The vibrations felt nice, and the tight suction was heavenly.

He vaguely registered the probing of his insides but ignored it in favor of the slight thrusts Severus allowed him. He loved watching Severus like this. His hair almost hid his face, but sometimes he would look up, his eyes blown with lust and his lips stretched thin around Harry's cock. Harry could feel his cock pulse against Severus' tongue. Harry wanted to see Severus' hair tied back some time. He was sure he would look good that way, especially like this.

Suddenly, Harry became aware of a new sensation, like licks of pleasure deep inside him. His muscles echoed the waves of pleasure coursing through him. Harry whined in pleasure, thrusting his hips up harder than he intended, driving himself deeper into Severus' mouth. Severus' nose pressed into his pubes. Severus' fingers moved inside him. It was almost too much for Harry; he was too sensitive, the pleasure coming too fast, too strong.

"Oh god. Please. I'm gonna come." Harry nearly sobbed when Severus' fingers withdrew, and his fist tightened around Harry's cock.

"Don't come just yet. I haven't finished stretching you, and I don't want to wait for you to recuperate." It was only later, when Harry felt Severus' mouth along his cock and licking his glans, that he gasped again. This time in surprise.

"Oh god, I forgot you can now talk with your mouth full," Harry mumbled incoherently as Severus grinned around his cock, before letting it slip free from between his lips. The cold air against his spit-slick member was sobering.

"Do you want to turn over? It will be easier on your hands and knees," Severus asked as he smoothed his hands over Harry's somewhat quivering thighs.

"Mmm, I wanna kiss you first." Harry lazily opened his arms and welcomed Severus into his embrace. He loved kissing him. He couldn't wait to try all the positions Severus could possibly have in mind.

He loved it when Severus laid on top of him, hip to hip, chest to chest, lazily frothing against one another as they kissed. Severus was still hard, and Harry couldn't believe how good this felt. He hadn't even come yet, but it already felt like the best sex of his life.

"I want you," Harry rasped, pushing Severus' away just enough to turn himself around. He shivered as Severus raked his fingers down Harry's back, and grasped his arse. Harry laid his chest down on the mattress as Severus spread his cheeks, and kneaded the muscles, Severus' thumbs brushing over his crack.

Harry moaned as Severus thumbed his hole, before burying two fingers inside.

It didn't burn this time; they went in easily. Harry gasped when Severus' fingers angled down inside him and pressed against his prostate.

"Please hurry up," he begged.

"You look gorgeous," Severus said, as he worked in a third finger. It stung, but it wasn't unbearable. "I want to look at you all night."

Harry hummed. "Another time, then. I really want you inside me right now." Severus' fingers were pumping, and Harry arched his back, holding his arse higher to angle the fingers just right. He didn't even need Severus to stroke his cock, he was sure he would cum eventually from this alone.

"I think you are ready." Severus came closer. He held Harry's cheeks, and Harry felt Severus' cock rest in the valley of his arse. Severus rubbed himself between Harry's cheeks, the head of his cock catching on Harry's pucker. Harry wiggled his hips in response, raising them off the mattress, silently begging to have it.

"You truly are a sight to behold. And all for me." Harry doubted Severus meant to say the last bit, but it was hard to regulate just what you were meant to keep to yourself when in the heat of the moment.

"Please, give it to me already," Harry whined and spread his knees wider.

"Shush. I got you." Severus positioned himself, and Harry fought the urge to tense his muscles. It felt as though he was gaping wide open when Severus nudged at his hole.

Severus spread more lube on his cock and pushed in. The tip went in easy, but Harry gasped at how full he felt when Severus started working the rest inside him. It stung a little. Harry remembered Severus' earlier instructions and pushed back. It made it a bit easier, but it was also a bit tiring.

"Remember to breathe," Severus said, his breath tickling Harry's neck.

Harry did just that, exhaling loudly. It helped Severus to sink in the rest of the way.

"Good boy." Harry shivered. Usually he disliked being called a boy, especially if it sounded demeaning, but right now, coming from Severus' lips, it was near liberating. A high praise.

"Please," Harry moaned, already impatient for more.

"Ready?" Severus thrust shallowly, not nearly enough, and Harry whined as his cock dragged against the sweet spot inside him.

"Yeah, please. Please, Severus." He pulled a pillow under his head and held the headboard so tightly his knuckles turned white.

"Only since you asked so nicely." Severus mused as he pulled back until only the tip was still inside, then thrust back down to the hilt. It was sudden, but Harry loved it. He moaned and whimpered as Severus held his hips tight enough to leave imprints on his skin as he set up a firm pace.

"You're so tight," Severus groaned, shuffling even closer as he thrust harder. "And so responsive."

He wasn't kidding. He had Harry gasping and mewling in no time. Even Harry's moans came out halted and stuttering. Severus was so thick it easily knocked any thoughts straight from his mind. It was perfect. On each thrust, Severus' cock brushed back and forth against his prostate, and every time he did a sharp thrust forward it sent waves of pleasure up Harry's spine.

"Severus!" Harry called, hanging onto the headboard for dear life as Severus drove into him. It was perfect. Severus was perfect.

"Mo-ore," Harry panted, trying to twist himself so that he could see Severus. He was a sight to behold: all pale skin and long limbs, with black hair hanging around his face as he drove himself in faster.

Harry reached behind himself for Severus. "Please." Severus understood. He leaned down, and Harry pulled him even closer to kiss him. It was an awkward position for it, especially with all the movement. Harry gasped as he heard Severus' actual voice groan in his ear, before biting down on

his shoulder. Severus' hands circled around his chest, and he maneuvered them both onto their sides, without breaking their connection.

He pulled Harry's leg up and told him to hold it in position. One of Severus' hands slid down Harry's chest, over his stomach, and started stroking his cock.

This position was somewhat better. Harry could lean back more easily, and he could kiss Severus without hurting his neck. It didn't hurt that Severus could easily stroke him, and the thrusts were entirely under Severus' control. All Harry had to do was keep his leg up to give Severus unrestricted access.

He just liked being under Severus' control. He liked being manhandled into positions, and he liked it when Severus crowded him.

He loved how easily Severus thrust inside him, battering his prostate, making his head hazy with lust and pleasure.

"Please. I'm close." Harry's cock twitched and pulsed like crazy. The battering his prostate was undergoing made his legs quiver for an entirely different reason than muscle fatigue.

"So am I." Harry startled when the voice did not come from next to his ear, as he had suspected from Severus' panting, but from where Severus' Vocal Cube floated above them. The difference in source of the sound was apparent from this close to the real thing. "Don't hold back," Severus encouraged, moving in such a way that Harry almost saw stars.

"Severus Severus Severus," Harry whimpered, teetering on the edge of orgasm. He didn't last long at all when Severus' grabbed his waist and tugged him as close as humanly possible to grind against him. Severus' hips circling flush against Harry's backside, kneading Harry's prostate with his cock.

Harry yelled as he released, and Severus wasn't far behind him. Severus' cock twitched inside Harry as he released, and Harry whimpered at the sensation. It almost as if like Severus' cock was reaching to get just that little bit deeper to fill him up.

After, they both slumped in a heap, panting heavily, tangled in each other's arms. Harry never wanted to leave Severus' embrace.

But he had to admit that it felt weird when Severus slipped out from inside him. He could feel the mess leaking out.

"I don't want to move," Harry said, and rolled onto his stomach. Severus followed him, lying half on him. Even if they were both hot after the exercise, neither of them minded. Harry especially liked it when Severus was so warm, and the sweat began to turn cold against his skin.

Severus hummed, even if his real voice sounded rusty, and almost painfully hoarse. "Wait here," the Vocal Cube instructed and followed Severus away from the bed.

Harry heard water running, and was tempted to get up and join him, but he didn't even have time to prop himself up before Severus came back.

He brought with him a wet towel, and Harry appreciated it when Severus took care of him so well. He cleaned the mess they had made, and made sure Harry was comfortable. It made Harry's heart swell, so he immediately opened his arms for Severus, eager to show him just how grateful he was.

They kissed lazily, and Severus pulled the covers over them.

"Sleep, brat. I know you are exhausted," he said, as Harry turned to embrace him.

"I will. Just hold me," Harry said, half asleep.

"Cuddler," Severus sneered, saying it as if it was a bad thing.

"Fight me."

Severus groaned as he set the Vocal Cube aside for the night. Then, he wrapped his arms around Harry and held him tight against his chest.

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Harry woke up in the morning, early as usual. Both he and Severus were early risers. Harry's head was on Severus' chest, and his limbs were all over the place. Severus was on his back, like a corpse, and not seeming to mind that Harry was using him as a pillow and getting hair all over his face.

Harry snuggled further into the crook of Severus' neck, and made himself comfortable. "Morning," he rasped, enjoying the dim morning light and the warmth.

Severus groaned loudly, protesting the mere thought of being roused before his morning coffee was finished. He turned his head to the side and made a sleepy twitch which gave no result in aiding his effort to roll over.

Harry snorted. He knew Severus was spectacularly cranky in the morning, and woe betide the poor soul who tried to engage him in conversation before he had consumed at least one whole cup of coffee. Harry personally didn't even bother until the man had started his second cup, and even then, it wasn't safe.

Harry still couldn't believe he was here. Not here, as in a physical place, but here, with Severus, living in Grimmauld Place, falling madly for his most hated teacher, and actually cherishing his company in these early morning hours. He was lucky.

"I'll go brew us some coffee." Harry clambered up and kissed Severus' forehead. This time Severus' answer was a bit more accepting. He didn't return the gesture, only hummed sleepily, but Harry counted himself blessed Severus had not tried to throw his Vocal Cube at him in blind effort to silence the intruder. Harry had seen what happened to the early birds outside Severus' window, and he didn't particularly fancy their fate.

He Accioed yesterday's clothes and took them to the laundry before having a quick shower.

Once done with his morning routine, Harry started at least 3 mugs worth of coffee for Severus, before beginning their breakfast.

Harry startled when he heard the fireplace flare. He wasn't expecting guests, and it was way too early for anyone but Molly to be awake.

He readied his wand, and almost had the intruder strung up on the ceiling before he realized someone hadn't just managed to break through his wards.

"What the fuck are you doing here? No offense, but it's way too early for guests." Harry calmed his heart and gestured for Draco to follow him into the kitchen.

"I promised I would bring some things over for Severus. He gave me your address and told me to

come by any time. I have an interview in the Ministry at 8 o'clock, so I thought why not take care of it before I have to go," Draco explained, while he subtly inspected the house. Harry had only recently finished the renovations, and if Draco dared to find fault in them, he would toss him onto the doorstep.

"Severus is still upstairs, but he should come down once he smells breakfast," Harry said, as he got back to his cooking. Thankfully he hadn't managed to ruin anything.

"May I have some coffee while I wait?" Draco asked, fully expecting to be served.

"Want some eggs and bacon with that?" Harry sassed, but poured him a cup nonetheless.

"No thank you, I ate before I came, but thank you for the offer."

Harry rolled his eyes, choosing to tend to the breakfast instead of amusing Draco with his games.

When Harry plated their breakfast, Severus arrived. He was fully dressed and ready to face the day, even if his glare was quite proficient. He shuffled over to his usual seat, and Harry slid his coffee over without further ado.

Severus squeezed Harry's hand, as was custom by now, to thank him for the coffee, but he also kissed his palm, which Harry had not expected. Definitely not in front of Draco.

Severus escaped the incoming interrogation by hiding behind his cup, happily sipping his drink with no Vocal Cube in sight. The traitor had absolutely thrown Harry under the bus.

"Seems like the master bedroom has been reclaimed," Draco mused over his own cup.

Harry glared at him. "What are you on about?"

"Do you remember when you came over asking for some Potions? I asked you where you had situated Severus. You said you had him in your guest bedroom, for now. I then said, that guest bedroom, for now, sounds like master bedroom is an upgrade under consideration." Draco explained. "I didn't expect it to actually happen, though."

Harry groaned, but knew better than to deny he had said it. He remembered how awkwardly he tried to explain that he had taken over Sirius' old bedroom, and he wasn't about to start explaining his relationship to anyone.

"Congratulations. You are now the first one to actually know. Hermione knows that there's something going on, but she doesn't know that we actually got together yet." He put their breakfast on the table. He was seated opposite Severus, and Draco was next to Harry, although at the other end of the table.

"I bet she and the rest of the Weasels will be jealous to hear I got to hear the news first," Draco said smugly.

"Well, good news. We're having a housewarming party, and you're all invited."

Severus nearly spat out his coffee before glaring at Harry.

"I wasn't kidding yesterday. I've finished with the house, and the Weasleys have been wanting to see it for months now. You have been living here for months already, so a housewarming is long overdue. I'm going to invite Hermione, the Weasleys, Andromeda, and Teddy. Draco and Narcissa are welcome, even if I have to invite Kingsley to personally oversee her invitation. You can invite

whomever you want." Harry was unwilling to relent on this.

Severus sighed loudly before waving his hand in a dismissive motion. Harry knew he got his way.

"Thank you. You can pick the date, but preferably leave it for a few more weeks so Hermione can attend." The date to reverse the Memory Charms on her parents was almost at the door.

Severus frowned, but acquiesced with a nod. Harry knew Severus hated surprises being sprung on him, so it would help if he got to be in control of just when the visitors would be arriving.

"How awfully domestic." It was Draco who interrupted their little conversation. "I'm sure my mother would be delighted to meet her sister again, but house arrest is house arrest, so I leave it up to our savior and golden boy to convince the officials." Draco took a small container from his pocket, before placing it on the table. "And here are the items I promised, Severus." Draco pushed the rectangular box over, before enlarging it. It wasn't bigger than a briefcase.

Harry was disappointed to find out it was filled with books and potion ingredients. For some reason he had expected something more.

"I must be leaving now, but I'm sure Severus will owl us the invitations. Have a good day." Draco nodded at them, before making his way back to the fireplace.

It was silent for a while, and Harry had to break it. "I find this entire situation so bizarre. Draco Malfoy, in my house, and it isn't even properly morning yet."

Severus grinned at him, before taking some books from the briefcase, and pushing them over to Harry.

"What are these?" Harry asked, as he read the titles. Severus had got Harry several books on charms, runes, and spell creation. There were also many medical tomes, and books about spells and equipment used to aid medical recovery. There was even an extensive handbook about everything from enhanced glass eyes to peg legs and walking sticks.

Harry smiled as he set them aside. "You really think I could do well making physical aids?"

Severus nodded. He finally picked up his Vocal Cube, and gently pushed it into the air. "You could do many things. Besides, you have yourself a Potions Master willing to help, as long as it doesn't take too much from my daily workload."

It was elevating to hear. "Thank you, Severus."

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It was fascinating how so little and so much could change at the same time. Harry and Severus' established routine did not change much at all thanks to their budding relationship, but at the same time so many small things did. Severus' bedroom slowly turned into their bedroom, but Severus still brewed, and Harry still made sure meals were ready when they should be. They still had their evening talks by the fire, but they now also had a Saturday date night. Harry had enrolled himself in independent study courses at the same university Hermione attended, to study the basics of mediwizardry. He also took some muggle university courses on health care. The muggle courses were surprisingly useful for mapping out just what the Wizarding World needed, as well as what could be improved on. Muggles had come up with several new inventions during the past years, and there only seemed to be more coming onto the market. Harry couldn't wait to create magical equivalents for hearing aids, contact lenses, and prostheses in particular.

Harry and Severus spent many hours talking about their possible future plans, and how to best prepare for them.

Harry still wanted to try his hand at flying brooms, or more specifically, trying to figure out a pleasant form of flying which he could use to lure Severus to fly with him. Not to mention that the long-distance traveling methods that existed were really off-putting to Harry.

But those were just pet projects for him; things that as of yet hadn't even escaped the drawing board.

Severus was happy to help him design potions regimes for patients who needed more care. Maybe once Harry finished with his studies, they could even consider turning some of the first floor of Grimmauld Place into a reception, and they could work together in physical therapy.

They were great plans, and Harry couldn't wait to see how they would turn out.

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The housewarming party happened several weeks later. Molly insisted on bringing food, even though Kreacher had already prepared snacks for everyone. Draco had arrived with Narcissa, who was able to come over for a small window of time with a Ministry-appointed escort. Kingsley happily accepted the role, as he had also been invited.

Now the house was full of Weasleys — even Ginny, Charlie, Bill, and Fleur were able to make it — as well as Andromeda and Teddy. Some of the Hogwarts staff had arrived at Severus' invitation: Minerva, Flitwick, Poppy, Sprout, and even Neville. It was a full house, and Harry was glad he had the room to host them all.

"Where is my favorite godson?" Harry asked when he saw Andromeda. He was happy she allowed him to hold Teddy. "I'm so sorry I haven't been able to visit. It took so long to get everything settled after the war. Afterwards, it was all about renovating the house. I would love to have you both visit every now and then. God knows Grimmauld Place wouldn't have been safe for a toddler before."

Teddy drooled, his sky-blue eyes staring at Harry in awe. Harry had been worried Teddy would be shy around him. He felt extremely guilty for not spending more time with his godson, but he would remedy that from today on.

"I'm glad to hear you have been busy and haven't forgotten about us," Andromeda said with a smile, clearly not saying it to spite him, but Harry faked offense.

"I would never! Severus and I even made bedrooms for the both of you. Would you like to see?" Harry asked as he held Teddy against his chest. Teddy seemed content, as began chewing on the string of Harry's hoodie.

Andromeda immediately conjured a toy for him, which Teddy grabbed, but he didn't abandon the string. "I'm sorry. He's teething."

"It's okay. He has grown so much since I last saw him." Harry couldn't resist petting through the soft baby hair Teddy had in abundance. Just like with Remus, it was pale brown. It didn't seem to sit still properly, still too soft to tame properly. As Teddy turned to look at him, he tried for Harry's glasses, and Harry had to pry his tiny, dirty hands from his frames. His eyes glinted with specks of green.

"Weren't his eyes blue just a moment ago?" Harry asked, and he looked closer.

"Ah, that's just my daughter in him. I'm grateful babies only have a little control of their power. Otherwise they would be a menace to take in public." Andromeda laughed, and Harry felt his heart ache at how adorable the little boy looked.

"I need to show Severus." Harry immediately became distracted, forgetting all about the recently renovated rooms, and sought out his partner.

"Severus, look! Teddy can change his eye color." Despite Severus' protests, the child was immediately shoved into his arms, and he held the boy awkwardly. There was no chance of him dropping Teddy, but he didn't want to risk getting any of the boy's germs on his clothes.

"Absolutely deplorable— adorable, I meant," Severus grumbled, as Teddy squealed through a wide, toothless smile, and tried to pat Severus' nose. "Exactly like the other brat I seem to be encumbered with. All smiles and loud bravado."

"Severus," Harry scolded playfully and nudged him with his shoulder.

"He does have beautiful eyes," Severus granted, but he wasn't even looking at Teddy.

Harry blushed. "He's trying to do your hair."

Severus held the child further from himself. "Dear god, no. As adorable as he must look, he could do better."

Harry grinned and took Teddy back, without a care in mind as Teddy tried to grab the buttons of Harry's shirt. "Nonsense," Harry cooed. "Would you like to come with me to show Andromeda and Teddy their rooms?"

"If I must," Severus acquiesced, and led the way.

Andromeda's room was right next to Teddy's. It was light and homey, with chestnut furniture, and landscape pictures on the walls. In comparison, Teddy's room was a wild house. The walls had a forest painted on them, with animals running around. He had a four-poster bed with green curtains to make it look like a tent, and there were already many toys neatly stowed away, and the den Severus had talked about earlier was in the corner.

"You boys have been busy," Andromeda noted, as she glanced around.

Harry tried to show the painted animals to Teddy, but he didn't seem to even notice, no matter how much Harry tried to point them out. Instead, he saw a colorful toy meant for children his age, and squirmed on Harry's lap to try and reach it.

"Boy already knows exactly what he wants. He's going to be a stubborn one." At least Severus had not brought in houses or parentage into his comment. Harry knew Severus still had a hard time letting bygones be bygones.

"I have already noticed as much. He gets fussy if he can't have something in his tiny hands," Andromeda cooed as she watched Teddy play.

They decided to take the toy with them, to keep Teddy happy while he was shown off to many more people downstairs.

Narcissa especially was excited to meet her nephew. She held Teddy on her knee, and gently jumped her leg to imitate riding on a horse.

Harry found it interesting to see Mrs. Malfoy so enthusiastic with entertaining a small child.

"He is a cute lad, isn't he?" Harry mentioned to Severus, watching from the sidelines as Molly, Andromeda and Narcissa all cooed at Teddy. Molly had already promised to knit so many little socks for him.

"He is. It's fortunate he's your godson, so perhaps you won't be wanting one of your own anytime soon," Severus mentioned as he got himself a drink. He brought Harry a butterbeer, and a glass of whiskey for himself. It was his homecoming, and if he was to endure a house full of Weasleys, he deserved it.

"Hmm, maybe not until I finish my education and get started with a job, but eventually it would be nice to have a family. I always did want to have one. I was always jealous of how Ron had siblings and parents who would always have his back." Harry uncapped his drink. "What about you?"

"Merlin, no. I have had enough of brats for a lifetime. Give me a couple of years to forget what hell they were to put up with, and then I'll reconsider."

Harry laughed. "Teddy can be your test run. Who knows, maybe he is a Potions prodigy in the making."

Severus huffed. "Unlikely, but I will allow him the benefit of the doubt."

Minerva soon joined them, looking happier than when Harry had last seen her. Being headmistress suited her. "Severus, there you are! It has been such a long time, and you didn't even write me. How rude."

"My apologies. Harry has not seen fit to get us an owl as of yet."

"Nonsense, as if my Floo isn't always open for you. How have you been?" Minerva asked, eyes compassionate.

Harry let the two old friends to catch up, and he waved at Severus, who glared accusingly at him, as he was mobbed by the rest of the teaching staff. Harry blew him a kiss, and Minerva gaped at Severus.

It was revenge for the Draco Malfoy incident.

It would have been much more satisfying if Hermione had not been right behind him.

"Harry! Why didn't you tell me? How long has this been going on!" She pulled Harry into the kitchen so they could have some peace. Ron was there, of course, making his best effort to single-handedly conquer the buffet Kreacher and Molly had put together.

"Since" — Harry thought back — "our last talk, actually."

Harry winced when Hermione hit him on the arm.

"You could have at least told me. Draco sodding Malfoy has been following both Ron and me ever since we arrived here, bragging about knowing something that we didn't. How dare you tell him before us. Not that Ron understood any of it." She folded her arms and glanced at Ron, who was too busy loading his plate to hear her.

"I couldn't! You left for Australia not soon after. How are you parents, by the way?" Harry's effort to change the subject fell on deaf ears.

"They are visiting for the week, so ask them yourself. Now, tell me everything."

Ron joined them at that moment, his plate heaped with food, and spoke with his mouth full, "Tell Hermione what?"

Harry buried his face in his hands. He wished he had stayed with McGonagall and Severus. "I got together with..." Harry couldn't continue.

"With your crush, yeah?" Ron guessed. "That's awesome. Did you invite them too? I can't wait to meet 'im."

Hermione smiled smugly. "Harry's with Professor Snape."

Ron nearly spat his food all over them and broke into a coughing fit. "What?" he said once he had managed to stop choking, his eyes teary. "Since when? And, excuse me, but why?"

"For a few weeks now?" Harry sounded unsure.

"Weeks? Why didn't you tell me? Congratulations, by the way, but also, ew." Ron tried to not make a face.

"I was nervous! Muggles are really bad about this whole thing; they don't like anything other than heterosexual couples. And it is Severus — I know you hate him." Harry ran a hand through his hair.

"Harry — hey. It's cool, really. Two of my uncles were together. Wizards don't care for that stuff. It's just that it's—" Ron seemed awkward, but Harry felt a bit relieved. He was glad to know that in the Wizarding World people didn't have such prejudices. Maybe he should have guessed it. If people could fall in love with giants, a homosexual couple must be nothing in comparison.

Harry held Ron's shoulder, and spoke with conviction, "I really like him."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He's supportive, when he wants to be, and I like our talks. He's comfortable to be around. It's relaxing, in a way. I really do like him, Ron. He even came to a dinner with your family for me. He helped me redecorate the house, and he's kind of charming in his own way. He's still mean, arrogant, and rude, but he's also brave, thoughtful, and smart. When he's comfortable, he's actually really nice." Harry tried to explain, but he doubted he could reason with Ron.

"I'll take your word for it," Ron mumbled, not believing a word Harry said. "So, you like him, like him? I just— Wow. Good for you, I guess. I just want you to be happy, Harry. It'll just take a while for it to sink in." Ron still looked as if he was trying to puzzle it together.

Hermione butted in then, pushing Ron to the side. "Tell me everything! I want to hear how it happened!"

Ron seemed to pale. "I don't want any details. I'll just take my plate and go." He took two steps before he stopped and turned around. "Oh, and congratulations, Harry. I'm happy for you — whatever it is that makes you happy — even if I don't want the details. We cool?"

"Sure thing, Ron. You should play chess with Severus. He's actually really good."

Ron nodded and left. He seemed to be mumbling something along the lines of 'I just might', as he made his way.

At that exact moment, Molly came running into the Kitchen. "Harry! Oh my god — I can't believe what Severus just said. Why didn't you tell me?" Molly grasped him into a hug so tight it almost forced the air from his lungs. Over her shoulder, Harry saw Severus smugly blowing him a covert kiss.

That thrice damned bastard.

-

It was hours later when the last of the guests were trickling out, that Harry and Severus could crash on their drawing room sofa. Finally alone.

"We won't be doing this again," Severus mumbled. He leaned against the armrest, with Harry lying half on top of him.

"Not until Christmas dinner," Harry agreed.

"I still can't believe you left me with Minerva. I thought you were supposed to be loyal."

"You sent Molly after me. She had to give me the talk. Again." Harry pressed the last word, and gently elbowed Severus in punishment.

Severus snorted. "Serves you right, brat."

"No, it doesn't. You realize, that now that she knows we are together, we have maybe half a year before she will start hounding us about maybe getting engaged, and maybe settling down. Hermione is already being targeted."

"No," Severus spluttered. Harry couldn't help but feel a bit malicious at Severus' backfired retaliation.

"So, how bad was Minerva, actually?" Harry turned around, moving further onto Severus' chest.

"She asked if I wanted to come back to teach next autumn. I told her to forget about it. She also couldn't stop teasing me about my young and dashing partner. It must be old age, which affects her eyesight so."

Harry rolled his eyes at Severus' teasing. "I don't believe you." It was hard to be convinced otherwise when Severus always spewed truths and fantasies when he got too into the heat of the moment. The Vocal Cube narrated everything he thought with enough resolve.

"Such a misconception," Severus lamented, but his smile gave him away.

"Hush, you." He moved again, leaning for a kiss. "You like me."

Severus' hand pushed into his hair, and he kissed Harry back, slow and thorough. "I may have grown fond of you. A severe oversight on my behalf."

"Lies," Harry insisted as he nibbled on Severus' jaw. His hips pressed against Severus' stomach.

"Obviously." Severus fingers worked their way under Harry's shirt.

It soon turned into a lazy make out session on the sofa, with the fire keeping them warm, and their hips working in tandem.

It was only later, when they both lay content and sated on the sofa, magically widened to fit them

both side by side, that Harry approached a new topic.

"So what now, oh great Potions Master of mine? Finally pardoned and free, with a four-floor house in central London, and a small potions business booming. What's next?"

Severus hummed and thought on it for a moment. His fingers toyed idly upon Harry's skin, drawing nonsensical shapes.

"Well. First, I'm going to sell my house. I'm going to have to pack up all my possessions," Severus explained, and Harry listened with great care. He was a bit worried that Severus was intending to move out. "Then, we are going to visit your parents' grave."

The both of them. Together. Harry swallowed, feeling his stomach unknot slowly.

"Then you are going to buy us the flight tickets you promised, while I reserve us a hotel." Severus' eyes gleamed. "We'll have a nice vacation in Germany for a few weeks. I'll attend a Potions Expo, and you can eat all the bratwurst you want. We'll see some sights, and maybe I will even see you in leather trousers, who knows." Severus flipped his hand casually. "You will probably complain half the time about the detours we will make to hike in nature, while searching for native ingredients. And I will grouse over all the tourist hotspots you will inevitably drag me to."

Harry rolled his eyes.

"We will forget about any and all family gatherings and obligations and studies, and we will lock ourselves in the hotel room for a few days, ordering in, and only leaving the bed to try the bath." Severus grinned, and rolled over to kiss Harry once more.

"And after all that?" Harry asked in between kisses.

"Then we'll come back home and see where it takes us."

End Notes

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